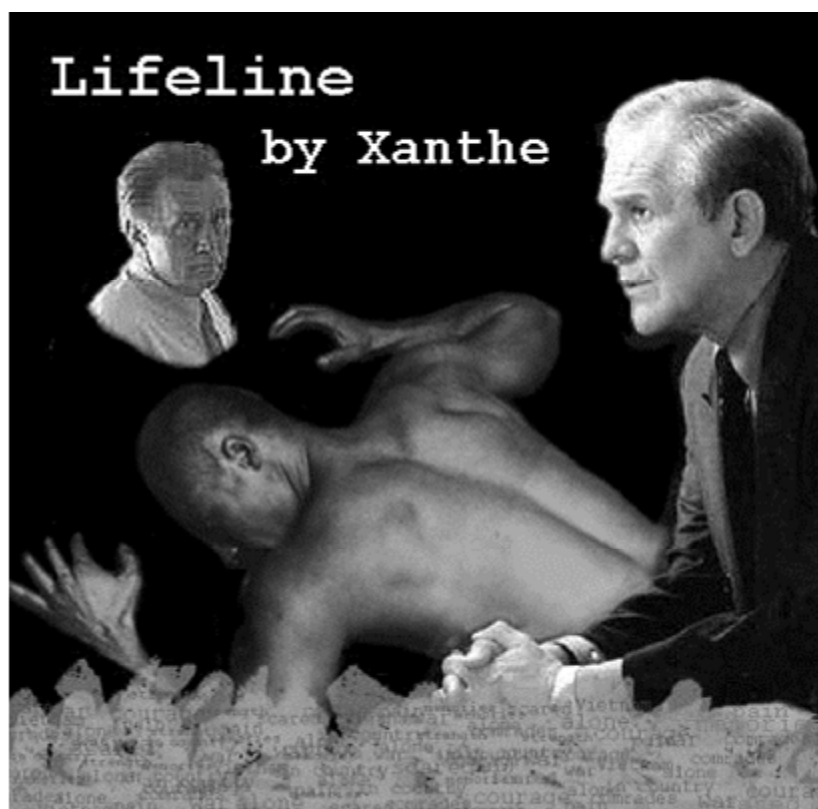


## Lifeline by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/lifeline/>

Story Notes:



Winner in **The Jeds**, West Wing Fanfic Awards, 2003, in the following category:

Outstanding Angst - 3rd place

1. **Chapter 1** by Xanthe
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### Chapter 1 by Xanthe

Monday Afternoon

"Sir, do you have a few moments? I really need to brief you on your meeting with the Vietnamese ambassador which is in..." Leo glanced at his watch. "Two minutes," he sighed.

"Two minutes? And you choose \*now\* to brief me?" Jed looked up irritably from his work and fixed his Chief of Staff with a glare. It had already been a busy day and meeting after meeting seemed to have jack-knifed into each other. He had been looking forward to at least a couple of minutes breathing space before his next appointment but clearly that was not to be – which wasn't Leo's fault as Jed knew very well. "Okay." Jed waved his hand wearily. "Bring it on, Leo."

Leo stepped up to Jed's desk and sat down in the chair beside it. "I'll keep this short – we're seeing Ambassador Trahn Duc Thuan about the increase in heroin being smuggled into the US from Vietnam."

"You'd think, seeing as they're able to quantify that the flow is increasing, meaning they can presumably track how much is going from there to here," Jed waved his arms around expansively, "that they might actually be able to stop it happening. I mean, what do they do? Send in some guy with a clipboard to check on the shipments and then just wave them on through customs?"

Leo gazed at him impassively, used to his friend's minor explosions as his way of blowing off steam. "The problem is that the drugs are being smuggled in in containers carrying shipments to legitimate US companies," he said when Jed paused for breath. "But the Vietnamese \*are\* talking tough on this – they genuinely want to crack down on it and they're asking for our help."

"Well that sounds very laudable – especially since we'll benefit too." Jed nodded, calming down in the face of Leo's usual implacable calm.

"Yeah. Well, the catch will probably be the kind of help they want – and in exchange for what." Leo gave a little grimace. "But I think we have room to negotiate with them on that."

"Okay." Jed nodded. "Ambassador Trahn Duc Thuan...what do we know about this guy?"

"Not much – he's a recent appointee. I think you gave him his investiture a couple of months ago – at least that's what it says on the file – I don't think I was here that day." Leo flicked through his papers.

"Leo, I see hordes of ambassadors." Jed waved his hand in the air again. "They wheel 'em in and I have my photo taken with them but I don't remember more than a couple of them. You can't expect me to have some idea how to deal with this guy on such a sensitive issue when I've barely met him and I've received a briefing that's been all of 30 seconds long!" Leo continued to give him that same steady gaze and Jed sighed. "I'm sorry, Leo – I didn't mean to bite your head off but it's been a long day."

"Feeling the pressure a bit today, huh?" Leo gave him a smile that Jed was sure he reserved solely for him – it went straight to his heart via his groin and he melted in response, as he always did. He and Leo had been playing this little scenario for years; he'd get upset and vocal about something and Leo would absorb his bad mood, and throw him a smile or make some comment that would calm him down. It was a kind of shorthand they had, and he knew he'd be lost without it. "Don't worry about it," Leo told him firmly. "We'll see what Thuan wants, and then figure out where to go from there."

"Okay." Jed gave a wry grin, wondering what he'd do without his friend. One thing was for sure – the door to the Oval Office would get slammed a hell of a lot more often without Leo around to make sure everything ran smoothly. Jed seriously doubted that he could actually be an effective President without Leo by his side.

"Sir..." Charlie poked his head around the door. "The Vietnamese ambassador is here."

"Show him in," Jed said with a sigh.

Trahn Duc Thuan was taller than many of his compatriots – he had half a head on Leo, and a fraction more on Jed. His expression was affable enough as he shook Jed's hand, but the President sensed that the man in front of him was smart, and not afraid to stand up for his own agenda - which made him all the more aware of how inadequately briefed he was for this meeting. He did his best to hide that though, easily slipping into his usual Presidential mode of breezing bonhomie. The Ambassador shook Leo's hand and Jed offered the man a drink, which he refused. Jed sat down and looked expectantly at Leo, waiting for him to start the meeting, but his Chief of Staff, unusually for him, seemed preoccupied. He was still standing, gazing at his own hands, apparently lost in thought. Jed felt another wave of annoyance, his already bad mood worsening.

"Leo?" He prompted. Leo seemed to come to, and his gaze travelled slowly from his hands over to where Jed and the Ambassador were seated, ready to conduct the meeting, but he made no move to join them. "Leo!" Jed bellowed, none too subtly.

"Sir?" Leo looked blank, almost confused. Jed frowned and gestured with his head in the ambassador's direction.

"Uh, yes...Ambassador Thuan, you're here to, uh...discuss your narcotics problem...I think," Leo said, sounding as if he wasn't entirely sure why any of them were here. He finally came over and sat down on the couch, facing the Ambassador. Jed shot him a glare as he sat down, to let him know that he hadn't appreciated being left hanging but Leo didn't even

seem to be aware that Jed was in the room. His gaze was fixed on the Ambassador, and he was studying the man intently. Ah well, better late than never, Jed thought, glad he had finally got Leo's attention turned to the meeting.

"Our problem in this area is your problem too, I think," Thuan pointed out, his eyes narrowing. "The heroin smuggled out of Vietnam ends up being sold to your children after all." Thuan gave a cold, hard kind of smile. "We face certain challenges in building a 21st century economy in a business culture rife with corruption. The will is there – but I'm sure you understand that that is often not enough," he said smoothly.

Jed gazed at him thoughtfully. He'd been right; this guy clearly knew what he was talking about and what he wanted from this meeting – which was more than Jed felt he could say right now.

"It would benefit both our countries if we could address this issue together," the Ambassador finished with another of those cool, charmless smiles.

"Agreed," Jed said, glancing at Leo, but his Chief of Staff didn't say a word. Usually Leo guided meetings such as this in his own discreet, subtle, inimitable way, especially when he knew that Jed hadn't been properly briefed, but right now Jed felt as if he was on his own. ""What did you have in mind?" Jed continued.

"Excuse me, sir," Leo murmured. Jed looked at him, expecting him to cut into the discussion with some comment or other, but instead, much to his surprise, Leo got to his feet, and with a muttered, "Excuse me, Ambassador," in Thuan's direction, he left the room without another word. Jed gazed after him, absolutely dumbstruck. First he'd been shunted into this meeting without having the facts and figures at his fingertips, and now Leo was just abandoning him? Jed glanced back at the Ambassador and gestured to him to continue. He could at least find out what the man wanted. He didn't have to commit himself to agreeing to anything on this initial meeting – and later...later he'd give his Chief of Staff a damn good piece of his mind.

Jed continued with the meeting for the next ten minutes, asking questions which he knew made it clear how inadequate his briefing had been, but without Leo he didn't have anyone to steer him away from the obvious pitfalls. He kept expecting his Chief of Staff to reappear at any second but when that didn't happen, Jed brought the meeting to a premature end and promised the Ambassador that he'd get back to him and schedule another meeting to discuss the matter further and in more depth in a couple of days.

As soon as the Ambassador was out of the door, Jed strode into Leo's office, a thunderous expression on his face. He had a ton of questions he wanted answered and he wanted them answered *\*now\**. He felt even more enraged when he found Leo sitting at his desk, gazing at some documents as if nothing had happened.

"Leo!" He snapped, hurling himself into the room like a minor hurricane, propelled forward by the force of his own indignation.

Leo jumped, as if had been miles away, and looked up, a dazed expression on his face.

"What the hell was that about?" Jed demanded, coming into the room. "I wasn't even briefed, god damn it, Leo. I felt like a complete idiot! Where the hell did you go? What the hell did...?" He stopped in mid-tirade, his expression, manner and mood changing abruptly as he realized something was very wrong. "Leo, are you okay?" he asked; Leo was as white as a sheet, his hands were shaking, and he looked almost dazed.

"Yes...I'm fine," Leo replied, pulling himself visibly together, but Jed wasn't convinced for a second. "I'm sorry, sir. It was inexcusable of me to leave the meeting like that."

"What the hell happened?" Jed frowned, plunking himself down on Leo's couch.

"He's sick," a voice piped up from the doorway.

"Margaret!" Leo snapped, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"He just threw up in the bathroom. He shouldn't be here at all," Margaret said in a reproving tone. "He should go home."

"Margaret has her spies everywhere," Leo growled. "Even, it would appear, the bathroom; she had Josh follow me in there."

"Well I think she's right. If you're sick then you *\*should\** go home so you can throw up in peace and quiet in your own place," Jed told him firmly.

"There's no need. I'm fine now. It must have been something I ate. I feel a lot better," Leo protested.

"Well you look terrible," Jed told him frankly, his anger totally forgotten in the face of his worry about his friend's health.

"Yes. You do," Margaret added pointedly from her vantage point by the door. "You almost knocked me over sprinting from the Oval Office to the bathroom. I was just worried – that's why I sent Josh after you." Leo shot Margaret what Jed could only describe as a vicious glare and she backed away from the doorway and disappeared into her own office.

"I'm really fine," Leo said to Jed.

"Sure – that's why your face is the same colour as your shirt," Jed told him in the same reproving tone that Margaret had just used. Leo glanced down at his white shirt, as if he couldn't remember what colour it was, and then glanced back at Jed again, that slightly dazed expression returning to his face. "Go, Leo. I've told the ambassador that we'll get back to him on this. I'm sure Debbie can squeeze him into my schedule somewhere in the next few days."

"Right." Leo looked at Jed blankly, and then his face went a sickly green colour.

"Oh god...you're going to throw up again, aren't you?" Jed got up, grabbed Leo's wastepaper basket, and thrust it under Leo's face just in time as Leo retched into it. Jed rubbed soothing circles on his friend's back, murmuring meaningless words of comfort as Leo heaved his guts out into the basket. He finished, finally, and rested there, breathing heavily, clutching the basket in his hands.

"So, you're going to go home now, right?" Jed queried when Leo finally sat up again.

"Yeah. I guess." Leo nodded weakly.

"Good." Jed's hand came to rest, briefly, on Leo's hair, and he stroked gently. "Get some rest, Leo – and don't come back to work until you're feeling better. I'll call you later. Margaret!" Leo's secretary appeared in the doorway at the speed of light, leading Jed to believe that she had in fact been standing just outside it the entire time. "Call a car for Leo – he's not driving in this condition," Jed told her. She nodded quickly and hurried off, shooting a concerned glance at Leo as she went.

Jed walked over to Leo's coat stand and retrieved his friend's coat. "Can you stand?" He asked, returning to where Leo was sitting, still hunched over the basket, his forehead covered in fine beads of sweat.

"Sure," Leo said – over optimistically as it turned out. As soon as he got to his feet he began to sway; Jed threw the coat on the desk and grabbed his friend, holding him up firmly until Leo got his bearings, then bundled him into his coat and buttoned it up for him as if he were a small child. It was a measure of how ill Leo had to be feeling that he didn't protest and knock his hands away, Jed thought to himself. Instead Leo leaned on his friend and accepted his help, his face almost deathly white in colour. Jed was seriously worried now, but Leo assured him it was just food poisoning and in the end there was nothing Jed could do except escort Leo to the door of the building and hover uselessly as Leo climbed inside the waiting car. Leo gave him a wan smile as he settled in his seat, and Jed watched the car go, an anxious frown creasing his forehead. Leo was rarely sick – the man had the constitution of an ox, and even several years of alcohol and substance abuse hadn't damaged the iron lining of his stomach. Jed could only remember a few occasions over the years when Leo had thrown up, and they had all been related to alcohol.

Jed watched until the car was out of sight, and then turned and wandered back into the building again, still frowning. Sure, it probably *\*was\** just food poisoning and yet...he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with his friend – something felt very wrong indeed.

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February 1970

January 6, 1970

Dear Leo,

She's here! Your god-daughter weighed in at 7lbs 4ozs on the morning of December 30th. I still can't believe she's real – although god knows she's making enough noise! (No comments about her taking after her father already, thanks Leo. Hah, I can hear you \*thinking\* it so don't deny it.) She's got five perfect fingers on each little hand and 5 perfect toes on each tiny foot. You wouldn't believe how small she is. Last night our heating broke and I was worried she'd be cold – it's freezing over here right now – so I brought her into our bed and cuddled her on my chest all night. I was afraid to sleep in case I rolled over on top of her, so I just lay on my back and watched her sleep. We've decided to call her Elizabeth though Abbey has already shortened it to Lizzie. I can't wait for you to see her. I'm enclosing a photo of me holding her so you can see how perfect she is. Abbey says to say 'hi' – she's glad that you weren't around to see her at her full pregnancy weight – I thought she looked great but she says she felt like an inflatable boat – complete with passenger.

Leo, I'm on a little cloud of happiness right now, as you can probably tell, but I'm worried about you. I haven't seen you since last June and I dunno if there's a problem with the post but I don't hear from you very often. It's been weeks since I last got a letter from you. Mainly I just hope you're okay. I know your mom would let me know if anything had happened, but I worry, Leo, as you well know, so for god's sake put me out of my misery and drop me a goddamn line!

"Hey, what are you reading?"

Leo glanced up to see Franco Morelli, a tall, dark-haired, good looking pilot looming over him.

"Get out of my light will you, Morelli," he groused amiably. "You're too fucking tall. Are they sending us freakin' giants or something these days?"

"Yeah, when they realized you short assed guys don't fight so good they sent us tall guys on over here to bail you fuckers out," Morelli grinned at him.

"Oh yeah?" Leo raised an amused eyebrow. He liked Morelli – the kid was only a few years younger than him but he made Leo feel old and god knows he was only 25. He liked the younger man's relaxed, laid back attitude though; hell, he envied it. He wasn't laid back; Jed often teased him that he'd been born old, and the plain truth was that he felt older than a lot of the men out here. He'd been used to taking responsibility from a young age – he figured he became a man the day his father blew his brains out with a shotgun, leaving Leo to take care of his mom and sisters, and that innate sense of responsibility had only gotten more pronounced during his time in the Air Force. Most of the new guys they sent out here were cocky and full of themselves, and Morelli was no exception, but he wasn't very good at hiding how shit scared he was sometimes too – hell, they were all shit scared sometimes – and Leo had taken him under his wing. He liked the fact that Morelli bantered with him in a way that reminded him a little of Jed. Some of the new guys were too over-awed by his reputation to answer him back but Morelli gave as good as he got. Leo knew his reputation preceded him; he was one of the old hands, and he had a formidable record as a fighter

pilot. Mainly though, Leo knew he was legendary among the new pilots for still being alive. It was a harsh truth that the most dangerous time was the first few months – if you made it through that then you got enough fighting experience to improve your chances of getting out of the war alive. If you didn't...well, Leo knew the statistics, and he'd seen more green young officers die than he cared to think about. He sincerely hoped Morelli wouldn't be one of them; the young man had only been out here a couple of weeks but Leo liked him.

"Your girlfriend write you, Captain?" Morelli peered over his shoulder but Leo folded the letter and showed the young Lieutenant the photo Jed had sent instead. "Who's this? Your brother?" Morelli asked, looking at the picture of Jed cradling the tiny baby in his arms. Leo shook his head, grinning.

"Nah. My best friend. His wife had a baby a few weeks ago – I just got the letter yesterday." Leo put the folded letter back in its envelope, resolving to finish reading it later, after the mission.

"A boy or a girl?" Morelli asked, smiling goofily as he looked at the photo.

"Little girl. They called her Elizabeth – I'm her godfather," Leo said proudly, glancing at the photo again.

"She's gorgeous. Your friend is a lucky man," Morelli told him sincerely.

"Yeah. She is gorgeous isn't she? It isn't surprising – her mom and her dad are both pretty good looking." Leo took back the photo and gazed at it again, unable to tear his eyes away. Jed looked so happy – his dark hair was flopping into his eyes, and he had this ridiculously ecstatic expression on his face as he tenderly held his first born child. "Yeah," Leo repeated again, savouring the picture. He had needed this right now, needed to be reminded of normal, everyday life, and how good it could be. It gave him something to strive for, something to look forward to. One day, he'd wear that same expression on his face – he was sure of it. One day he'd have a kid or two of his own and experience all the emotions Jed must be feeling right now. God, how he had needed to get this letter; the mail had been screwed up since Christmas, and anyway, he knew he hadn't been a very good correspondent of late. He could hardly expect Jed to write him if he rarely replied, and yet Jed did, every week, without fail, more often sometimes if he had the time or some piece of news he particularly wanted to share with his friend. Leo wished he knew how to reply to these letters – he treasured each and every single one of them and devoured them immediately when they arrived but his moods had become dark these past few months as this war had made him soul sick and weary to the core. Maybe it was partly his own fault; he'd completed his 100 missions but had chosen to stay on for another 100, not because he relished the battle, or even because he believed in what they were doing out here, but because he knew how valuable his experience was. He'd struggled with himself over it, but in the end he'd viewed it as his duty – he had the experience to survive where a green young pilot wouldn't, and he could impart all he'd learned to the younger pilots in an attempt to help them stay alive.

However the longer he was out here, fighting this war, the more he sensed a gulf opening



up between himself and Jed. Their lives were taking them in such different directions. He was mired out in this hellhole while Jed was moving forward, getting married, having a kid, and taking on all the new responsibilities of parenthood. Leo worried that their different life experiences would make them strangers to each other, and they'd lose the connection that Leo valued above all others in his life.

"You ready to go, old man?" Morelli asked, cutting through his morose musings, and Leo reluctantly put the photo away in his pocket, and fastened his flight suit at the neck.

"Yeah, little boy, I'm ready," Leo teased back, and they strode out to the waiting planes together.

It was a routine enough bombing mission. Leo still found it hard to believe that actually taking a F-105 Thunderchief out into the air and dropping bombs could ever be called routine, but as far as it went, this was it. There were plenty of things Leo had grown to dislike about his job, but climbing into the Thud wasn't one of them. He loved the machine like he had loved the old Chevy he'd driven back during his college days. He loved being enclosed in the cockpit, feeling the hard metal and plastic of the instruments under his hands, and hearing the low thrumming of the healthily turning engine. Leo had become familiar with his plane and relied on it to save his life every time he flew. He felt at one with the machine – when the canopy closed, it was just him and the Thud, and the machine became an extension of his body. He knew every single thing it was capable of, and it responded, unerringly, to his every command. He thought that was maybe why he was still alive when so many weren't – he had a feel for the Thud that so many young pilots never had a chance to acquire before they were shot down. He had a gift for flying this machine, and had picked it up a feel for it fast enough to survive when so many others hadn't, and, even though he was weary of this war, and his part in fighting it, Leo could never suppress the thrill he felt whenever he climbed into the cockpit.

Leo was mission commander of the four planes in his flight and he'd appointed himself as Morelli's wingman, the old hand keeping an eye out for the green pilot. They refuelled over northern Laos and then started their runs into North Vietnam. Leo got an adrenalin rush every time – the Thud was the fastest low-level fighter plane in the world, able to break the sound barrier in a straight line run, and however much he hated this war, he loved flying this plane. They went into Hanoi over Thud Ridge, going in low to drop their bombs, and then pulled up to regroup for the trip home. Leo checked that his flight was all safe – they were being hit hard by anti-aircraft fire and it hadn't been an easy run. If a plane got loose from its flight then the enemy would go after that single plane and pick it off so joining back up with the group was crucial, but he only counted two other Thuds – Morelli hadn't got back. Leo glanced around the skies anxiously for the missing Thud, and was relieved when he saw Morelli's plane limping back to join the flight.

"You okay, Morelli?" he yelled.

"Yeah...I took a few hits...I'm okay though," the younger man replied.

"Then let's get moving," Leo ordered, taking up position on the wing, trying to assess how

bad the damage was to Morelli's plane. It wasn't good – Leo could see a hole the size of a football but the Thud was a pretty tough plane – he'd known guys come back with holes in their planes they could climb through – so he hoped for the best, but it soon became clear that the damage was serious, and Morelli couldn't keep up either speed or altitude.

"I'm not going to get the altitude to refuel. What the fuck am I going to do, Captain?" Morelli yelled, panicking.

"Hold on," Leo replied, as calmly as he could. He ordered the other planes to return without them, and wheeled back to keep pace with Morelli. They were in serious trouble now and Leo knew it. His own plane was undamaged, and he had enough fuel to get safely back but he wasn't going to leave Morelli. If he stayed with the other pilot then he could protect him from attack from anti-aircraft fire, surface to air missiles and the MiGs that had been chasing them from Hanoi. If he left Morelli then he was a sitting duck – as good as dead.

"You're buying the drinks when we get back, Morelli," Leo said as they flew, trying to ease the tension.

"Yeah, yeah. The way you drink, Captain, I'll need to get a fucking loan," Morelli grouched.

"Aw, can't you keep up with the big boys?" Leo teased, checking the skies around them all the time. They were doing fine until they ran into some anti-aircraft fire over the border between North and South Vietnam. Leo took his plane into a spin, avoiding the triple-A as it peppered the air around him. Yet again, his sharp hand/eye co-ordination and the bond he had with the machine that was protecting him saved his ass, and he emerged from a sky full of shrapnel to see clear daylight on the other side. He glanced around, just in time to see Morelli's plane slowly disintegrating behind him. Leo turned his plane and frantically searched the skies – and was relieved when he saw a tiny figure parachuting down to the ground; Morelli had ejected in time before his plane went down...but he was going to land somewhere in the South, which, while better than ending up in the North, still put him in danger from the people who had been firing on them in the first place.

Leo called for a mid-air refuel and decided on a RESCAP mission. He called for a helicopter to go down and retrieve Morelli and set about turning his own plane into a target to draw the anti-aircraft fire away from the rescue chopper. It was a risky tactic, but Leo had done it a couple of times before; in his experience the young pilots they sent out here didn't get to be old men of 25 like himself unless you looked out for them, and besides, he liked Morelli, so he felt this was personal. There was a spate of heavy firing from the surface and Leo's heart sank as he saw the rescue chopper go down, in a mass of blazing fire. He barely had time to register his dilemma of what to do next when something exploded against the side of his plane and the healthily chugging engine gave a wail of distress and began plummeting towards the ground. Leo reacted instantly, knowing he only had a few seconds to get out before he went down with his Thud. He triggered the ejection mechanism and almost lost consciousness as he was flung out of the plane at great speed. Next thing he knew he was parachuting through the air, away from the burning remnants of his plane as it disintegrated beneath him.

Before he knew it, the ground was rushing up to meet him; he got tangled in some trees on the way down, leaving him with no choice but to cut his way out of his badly ripped parachute with his knife, and he fell the last ten or twelve feet onto the ground, landing awkwardly. He gasped in agony as he thudded onto the hard earth, and realized, just before he lost consciousness, that there was blood seeping from a shrapnel wound in his left shoulder that burned like hell, and he'd twisted his back during his forcible ejection from the plane.

He came to a few minutes later, groggy and disoriented. This was the first time he'd been shot down, and he felt a momentary pang for the loss of the plane that had kept him safe for so long before reality kicked in. There was a fierce battle being waged in the skies overhead, and Leo doubted they'd send another rescue chopper into that. The other Thuds up there were desperately trying to draw enemy fire to enable their grounded friends to get moving into safe territory but even so, he had a long walk ahead of him. Leo stowed the remnants of his chute and his helmet and began doing just that, trying to ignore both the pain in his shoulder and the deep, agonizing ache in his back. His heart sank as he saw the planes overhead slowly turn and make their way back to base, leaving him alone out here. He wondered where Morelli was but there was no point in looking for him – they'd both have to try and make their own way to one of the US patrols on the ground and hope they didn't run into the VC or the North Vietnamese army on the way. He didn't have a clue where he was, but he was essentially an optimist – he knew what he was doing, and he could think on his feet. All he needed was a big chunk of luck and he'd make it back to base safely. He thought about Jed as he trudged through the jungle, the night falling around him. When he got home, the first thing he'd do was take out that letter Jed had sent him and read it through from beginning to end, before penning a reply – it had been too long since he'd last written, and, having so closely escaped death, Leo made a resolution to be a better correspondent in future. That thought kept him going as darkness fell around him.

His survival training had taught him to move at night and stay under cover during the day and he continued for as long as he could, trying to ignore the agonizing shooting pains in his back and the burning pain in his shoulder, but finally he knew he had to stop and rest. He was in shock, both from the battle and the constant pain, and he knew he needed to get his breath back before continuing through the inhospitable terrain. He found some cover, and lay down, giving a hiss of pain as his back protested. He stared up through the trees, into the dark night sky, stunned, trying to take in the enormity of what had happened to him. He had been expecting – well, not quite a milk run, but another mark on his hat and a couple of rounds of boilemakers back at base; he hadn't been expecting to see Morelli go down, and he sure as hell hadn't been expecting to go down himself. His job had been the adrenaline highs of flying his plane on missions ranging from the routine to the dangerous – he'd never had to deal with this kind of physical hardship before, to say nothing of the sheer terror that the change in his circumstances induced. Leo thought of Jed, taking care of his new baby many miles away, with no idea of what had happened to his old friend and lover, and he closed his eyes, wanting desperately to be home.

He wasn't sure how long he slept, but he woke suddenly, just before dawn, to find a gun pressed against his forehead - and realised that the luck he had been counting on had just run out.

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## Chapter 2 by Xanthe

Tuesday Morning

"Leo – I thought you weren't coming in this morning," Jed said with a frown as he poked his head around Leo's office door to find his Chief of Staff seated at his desk, working.

"No, you told me I wasn't coming in this morning – I said I was and I did," Leo replied. He looked a lot better than he had the day before at least, Jed thought. He had called Leo the previous evening and had been assured that his friend was recovering but he remained unconvinced; he still felt that something wasn't quite right, but he was unable to put his finger on it. His friend seemed guarded and their telephone conversation the previous evening had been short and brusque. Jed shook off the feeling – Leo was sitting here, right in front of him, looking as right as rain, so his Leo-radar was probably just off.

"Hey – are you busy this evening?" Jed asked, plunking himself down on Leo's couch. It was early, and even Margaret wasn't in yet; Jed liked it when they had the place to themselves – he felt they could be \*them\*, and relax a little.

"I don't think so. Why?" Leo removed his glasses and glanced at Jed questioningly.

"I've been stood up." Jed grimaced. Leo raised an eyebrow and Jed gave a heavy sigh and began to elaborate. "I had this surprise meal planned for Abbey," he said. "I've been...well, kind of short tempered lately..."

"Just lately?" Leo teased. Jed made a face at him and continued, undeterred.

"So, I organized this special meal for her to smooth things over – I discussed the menu with Rene in some detail..."

"He must have loved that," Leo interrupted.

Jed fixed him with a firm glare. "Will you let me finish?"

"Sure." Leo grinned.

"I made sure he'd be serving all her favourite foods, set aside an entire evening in my schedule for some uninterrupted downtime, and..."

"Forgot to check with her office that she'd actually be free tonight," Leo finished for him.

"How did you know?" Jed asked in an astonished tone. "And don't you dare give me that 'I know everything' line. It may be true but it's \*annoying\*, Leo."

"It was just a wild guess," Leo told him, that grin tugging at the corners of his mouth again.

"Sometimes you are just so smug," Jed complained.

"And you're very predictable," Leo retorted.

"Hmm, well, as it turns out she's not only not free but she isn't even going to be in town so I'm stuck with a massive feast, carefully selected for its more, uh, aphrodisiac properties," Jed grinned, "and nobody to eat it with." He did his best to look mournful, rejected and abandoned in the hope that it would soften Leo's notoriously hard heart.

"So, what will we be eating then?" Leo said with a resigned sigh.

"You'll come?" Jed gave a delighted grin.

"Sure. I don't mind being second on your list of people to lavish exotic meals on," Leo said, with a wolfish grin.

"Exotic, \*romantic\* meals, Leo," Jed corrected him. "There'll be candles and everything – and I'll instruct Rene to set up the table in one of the guest bedrooms so you might as well plan on staying the night."

"Ah, you haven't even given me dinner yet and already you think you're gonna get laid," Leo lamented. "You must think I'm easy."

"You *are* easy, Leo," Jed pointed out. "I've been sleeping with you for over 40 years so I should know."

"Yeah, well, I'll just say, 'pot, kettle and black' and leave it at that," Leo replied, putting on his glasses and glancing back at his work.

"Are you sure you'll be up to an exotic meal after yesterday?" Jed asked, getting up.

"Sure. It was nothing. I'm over it." Leo waved a nonchalant hand in the air.

"Okay – oh, I spoke to Debbie and she re-scheduled the Vietnamese ambassador for Friday at 4 – she'll get Margaret to put it in your diary."

"Okay." Leo nodded, absently.

Jed gazed at him. "Sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Mr. President," Leo told him, glancing up again. Jed hesitated, that nagging feeling returning. He'd known Leo a long time and his Leo-radar had rarely been proved wrong – so why was it ringing such huge alarm bells in his head right now?

"Okay." He nodded, still unsure, and returned to the Oval Office. He wished he could put his

finger on what was bugging him. It was something about the expression in Leo's eyes – they were guarded, shadowed, evasive even, and while Jed had seen that expression in them before, usually when Leo was doing some complex political manoeuvring, he hadn't seen it directed at \*him\* in years. He was halfway to his desk when he remembered something and wandered back. "Leo – come by about 8 this evening and..." he began. Leo glanced up sharply and folded away the piece of paper he had been reading, as if he didn't want Jed to see it. "Anything interesting?" Jed asked lightly, too far away to see what it was.

"No – just...nothing." Leo shrugged, slipping it into his pocket.

"Okay." Jed nodded and went back to his office. At least Leo hadn't figured out that the meal thing had been a ruse. He wanted to spend some time alone with his old friend – Leo's health scare a few months previously had been a big wake up call to the President, and Jed had decided that from now on he wasn't going to take any chances where Leo's welfare was concerned. He had Abbey to look out for him but Leo didn't have anyone; Jordan was too new in his life for her to have assumed that role, so Jed figured it was down to him to make sure that his old friend and lover was okay. Maybe if they were alone together, and had a chance to really talk, he'd find out why Leo had that shadowed look in his eyes.

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Leo lay on the ground, trying hard to remember to breathe, as the VC surrounded him. He put his hands slowly on his head, making it clear he wasn't attempting to reach for a weapon, and then waited, his heart in his mouth. It would be so easy for them to just pull that trigger and then he'd die out here, in the jungle, alone save for these strangers. They'd probably just leave his body here – strip his uniform and boots and anything valuable, and dump his corpse to rot. He might never be found. He knew guys that had happened to; guys who just disappeared after being shot down. Maybe he'd be one of those guys whose personal effects were boxed up and sent back home, who were never spoken about again because everyone was scared the bad luck would rub off on them.

The VC officer was shouting at him but Leo couldn't understand what he was saying. He was nudged to his feet and stood up straight, telling them his name, rank, and serial number in what he hoped were calm tones, designed to defuse the situation. The man glared at him and spoke again. Leo shook his head, and repeated what he'd said. He was half way through reciting his serial number when his captor punched him hard on the jaw without warning. Leo sagged to the ground, and tried to protect himself as best he could as his captors kicked him several times. They stripped off his survival vest, watch, and the small, gold St Christopher medallion which had been a gift from his Mom and which he wore around his neck – these items were seized like bounty and handed around, and then his arms were bound tightly behind his back. He was dazed by the time they dragged him to his feet, and he lost track of the time as he was half marched, half dragged through the jungle. Next thing he knew he was thrown into the back of a truck with hands still tied behind him, his jaw streaked with his own dried blood. He tried to roll over in order to relieve the knifing pain in his back, but one of his captors misinterpreted his movement and shoved the butt of his

rifle at him. He felt his head snap back and heard a sharp cracking sound...and after that everything went black.

Leo regained consciousness only briefly during the next few hours. Whenever he woke, the various aches in his body combined to send him back into a fitful, half-dazed slumber. Then the first tendrils of light began to heat the truck and he woke again to find his cheek crushed up against someone's boot and a rifle pointed perilously close to his head. He closed his eyes and tried to remember his training, tried not to think about the reality of having been captured by the VC. He knew the prison camps around here were likely to be makeshift and brutal. The only good thing about landing in the South was that if he wasn't marched immediately over the border he might stand some small chance of escaping and being picked up by friendly forces.

A little while later the truck came to a rumbling halt and Leo was dragged out of the back, pulled into a rundown complex of small buildings, hauled along a filthy, rancid smelling hallway, and thrown into a dark room at the end of it. Someone bent over him and cut the ropes on his arms, and then the door clanged shut behind him and he breathed a sigh of relief that for now, at least, they were going to leave him alone.

He lay face down on the cold floor for a few moments, winded from the journey and the various blows that had been landed on him since his capture. He thought he was alone, so he jumped, startled, when he heard someone clear his throat. He glanced up, blearily, trying to focus as the room swam around him, and a tall, lanky figure came into view.

"Captain?" A voice whispered.

"Mo..." His throat was too dry to say the name so he swallowed and tried again. "Morelli?" He managed to croak, still trying to focus on the hazy figure beside him. Morelli was lying on his back, his shoulders resting against the wall.

"Yeah. It's me. You look like shit, man," Morelli told him.

"Believe me, that's nothing to how I fucking feel," Leo replied. "Could you help me up?"

"No." Morelli shrugged. Leo raised his head and gazed at him quizzically. Morelli's face finally sharpened into focus and he was able to see where the young Lieutenant was gesturing. He glanced down and winced as he saw the awkward angle at which the other man's leg was resting.

"Did they...?" Leo began but Morelli stopped him, shaking his head.

"It was my own fucking dumbass fault – I did it on landing. I blacked out when I bailed from the plane and still wasn't with it when I hit the ground – hell, I misjudged where the fucking ground was." Morelli gave a grimace. "It didn't take them long to find me – I could barely move."

"Shit." Leo gazed at the broken leg bleakly. Morelli had to be a lot of pain, but he didn't

think asking about it would help so he just took a deep breath and dragged himself up by his arms, hissing as the movement sent a wave of pain through his shoulder and back.

"How about you, Captain? Are you okay?" Morelli nodded in the direction of Leo's shoulder and he glanced down to see that his flight suit had been ripped open and was soaked with dried, encrusted blood.

"Shrapnel wound," he grunted, glancing around. They were in a small, dank cell, with no windows and no lighting, although some light managed to creep in through cracks in the walls, doors and ceiling so it was just bright enough to see. The place stank of urine, and there wasn't any bedding either – not so much as a blanket. Leo hoped this would only be temporary accommodation.

Having taken his bearings, he crawled over to Morelli's leg to inspect it further. His head ached so much that he thought it might fall off his shoulders but he knew that his own condition was far less serious than the younger man's. He crouched beside Morelli and gazed at the leg; it was a bad, open fracture – he could see part of the bone sticking out of the skin - and in conditions like this, and without urgent medical treatment, Leo thought it was likely that the Lieutenant would lose it.

"Is there a doctor in this place?" Leo asked.

"I have no idea. They sure as hell haven't sent him along if there is." Morelli shrugged, his face sickly green in hue.

"Have you seen anyone?"

"No. Only the guys who brought me here." Morelli shook his head. "Captain...please...is there anything you can do...?" He gestured with his head in the direction of his leg. "It hurts so fucking much."

Leo took a deep breath. "Okay...look, I'm no doctor, Franco - I've had the same basic first aid training that you have - but I can try and pull your leg out so that the bone pulls back into the skin."

"Please – just do it, Captain," Morelli begged. "Please."

Leo nodded, and examined the leg thoughtfully. The only thing he could do was to reset the bone as close to where it was as possible. It wasn't the best solution, but it was a stop gap. He wished he had some water to wash the area but he didn't and he doubted they'd be given any in the near future either, so he'd just have to go ahead without. He put his hands on the leg, and gazed at Morelli.

"Ready?" He said. "On the count of three. One..." He didn't wait until he reached three and pulled the leg out on the count of two instead – a trick his father had taught him when he was a small boy with plasters that needed tearing off grazed knees. Morelli gave a low yowl of pain, but Leo had managed to reset the bone and, while it still had to hurt, Leo knew it



would be a little less agonising now. He used his handkerchief to tie a makeshift bandage around the wound, but it wasn't anything more than a temporary measure. Morelli's face was white as a sheet, and his eyes were closed, sweat beading his forehead. Leo wasn't sure if he'd passed out or was just coping with the aftermath of his none too gentle first aid treatment but he decided to leave the other pilot alone. He glanced down instead at the shrapnel wound in his own shoulder, and gently probed it with his fingers, wincing slightly as he did so. It was painful, but there was nothing left in there now that he could find. There wasn't anything he could do so he decided to just try and forget about it. Then he slowly crawled over to the wall and came to rest against it with a grateful sigh, glad not to be moving any more.

Morelli shifted beside him, muttering something under his breath.

"Are you okay, Lieutenant?" Leo asked.

"You said three," Morelli whispered.

Leo gave a faint smile. "I lied," he replied. "How you doing?"

"A little better." Morelli nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

They were silent for a moment, and then Morelli spoke again.

"Captain, what will they do to us?" He asked. "I've heard stories...seen the guys they've paraded...y'know, for propaganda." Morelli turned to face him, and Leo was reminded again that even though the Lieutenant was only a few of years younger than him, he hadn't been fighting this particular war for very long. He looked like such a kid and those two or three years made all the difference. Leo knew he'd grown up these past few years, had gone through experiences that had changed him radically from the idealistic, enthusiastic young man he'd been when he'd first arrived out here to fight this war. Now, he felt cynical, world weary and infinitely old compared to this 22 year old kid sitting beside him.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I've seen those pictures too." He had received the same training in survival, evasion, resistance and escape that Morelli had, and they had both been briefed on what to expect if captured, but he figured that in his semi-delirious state Morelli might well not remember some of the details of those briefings.

"Those guys didn't give their confessions willingly. They were tortured," Morelli added, shivering. Leo didn't reply. "Do you think they'll torture us?" Morelli asked.

Leo shrugged. "I think they'll interrogate us," he replied.

"Is there a difference?" Morelli asked.

Leo shook his head. "I don't know, Morelli, but it sure as fuck doesn't do us any good thinking about it."

"No." Morelli shivered again and Leo knew the kid had to be in shock from his broken leg.

"They're more likely to want details of what we know than a confession," Leo murmured.

"Well that's okay because I don't know a damn thing," Morelli muttered.

"Sure you do," Leo grunted. "And if they ask, you should tell 'em," he said. They'd been given instructions on this subject too, but he doubted Morelli remembered that either in his current state.

"What?" Morelli swivelled his head to face him.

"Franco – that leg of yours isn't going to mend itself. You might have already lost it," Leo told him, as gently as he could. "If they offer you medical treatment as a price for information then you should take it...don't tell them anything important – just give away the small, stupid stuff."

"That's fucking crap!" Morelli snapped. "Sir," he added belatedly. Leo grinned at him in the semi-darkness. The lieutenant was so young, idealistic and full of shit. He reminded him of himself – and not so long ago either.

"Where are you from?" He asked, trying to change the subject.

"New York."

"Your folks still there?"

"Yeah. They have their own restaurant. I used to wait tables there."

"Bet they're proud of you," Leo commented. He wasn't entirely sure his own Mom and sisters were proud of him. Mostly, like Jed, he suspected they'd have preferred it if he hadn't come out here to do this, and recently he had been thinking they were right.

"Yeah." Morelli grinned. "You?"

"My Dad died years ago. My mom and my sisters live in Chicago."

"And that friend of yours? The one with the baby?" Morelli asked. That reminded Leo of Jed's letter and he reached into his pocket and fished it out, delighted that it had survived intact.

"He lives in New Hampshire." Leo shrugged.

"Any girls waiting for you back home, Captain?"

Leo gave a faint grin, and caressed Jed's letter with his fingers. "Oh yeah, Lieutenant. Too many to fucking count," he replied.

The day wore on and there was nothing to do except sleep, talk – and worry about what was going to happen to them. Morelli's dark head fell against Leo's shoulder, although whether the younger man was sleeping from shock or exhaustion Leo wasn't sure. He sat there, trying to come to terms with this sudden reversal in his fortunes. Like Morelli, he'd heard all the stories about what the VC did to captured American soldiers, and he knew their situation wasn't good. He wondered whether this was it – whether he'd die out here, so far away from home. What would his Mom say when she was told he was dead, he wondered, unable to stop himself imagining the worst. And his sisters. And Jed? Leo shivered, easily able to imagine Jed's reaction...and yet, and yet...his friend had a wife, and a new baby – how big a dent would his death seriously have on him? Sure, he'd be upset for awhile, but he'd get over it. Leo didn't kid himself that he meant as much to Jed as Jed meant to him. Glancing at Morelli to make sure he was asleep, Leo opened Jed's letter and began to read.

I'm working on a research grant right now. There's a chance of a job in London at the LSE but I don't want to talk about it too much in case it doesn't happen. It wouldn't be for awhile yet anyway – not until next year – but it's pretty much my dream job as it'd give me the opportunity to do my doctorate and get some real research work done – maybe even work towards a book. To be honest, we could do with the money. Abbey can't work right now for obvious reasons and I need to do something or we'll be in trouble. I lied earlier about the heating. It didn't break down - we just couldn't afford to pay the last bill. Abbey's threatened to wheedle some money out of Dad but I refuse to let her so we had a pretty big argument about it. But damnit, Leo, I feel I should be able to provide for my own family and I'll be damned if I go running to him. I'm sure he'd give us the money but there would be strings attached, and I don't want to have to deal with any of that shit.

Leo sighed and shifted slightly, trying to lose himself in the contents of the letter so that he could forget about his current predicament. He wished Jed didn't have to worry about money - Leo had always had a way of making money stretch - Jed called it a gift and Leo didn't think he was accusing him of being tight, just very good at managing his finances. Since he'd been in 'Nam there had been little enough to spend his salary on except liquor, and while he'd done his fair share of drinking, he'd saved up a good deal of his salary. He always sent a generous amount home to his Mom and sisters every month, but there was enough for him to send some to Jed too – if he'd accept it, which Leo knew he wouldn't.

I wish you could have been here at Christmas. Abbey was as big as a house by then (she just leaned over my shoulder and slapped me around the head for that comment – something for which I'm blaming you, my friend) and I refused to allow her in the kitchen. She thinks I was being gallant but really it's just that I think my cooking is better than hers. It was just the two of us on Christmas day – Mom got snowed in and Jon is busy with some girl he's found. We asked Dad but he refused – I gotta admit I was relieved about that – I always feel on the outside of his and Abbey's mutual admiration society and I know the money issue would've come up.

The one thing really missing was you – d'you remember Christmas last year? You brought

that huge turkey and we didn't realize until Christmas morning that it wouldn't fit in the oven? We spent an hour hacking it down to a manageable size while you kept pouring eggnog down our throats? I swear we were all drunk off our asses by the time we ate the damn thing – Abbey keeps telling everyone who'll listen that I'm allergic to eggnog but I think she just doesn't like how drunk I get on it. Anyway, Abbey and I had a quiet Christmas this year preparing for Lizzie's arrival, but we both missed you and the fun we had last year. I hope that wherever you spent Christmas you had a great time and raised a glass of eggnog for us as we did for you. I thought you might call – I'm guessing it's pretty hard for you out there right now but I want you to know we missed you.

Leo gave a guilty sigh as he read that. He could have called – but he hadn't wanted to remember the previous year so he'd spent most of Christmas day in a bar getting completely plastered and would have been too incoherent to have called Jed in any case.

Leo, there's some sappy stuff coming up, so you might want to have a drink before reading on. At the risk of upsetting that unsentimental, unromantic heart of yours, I want you to know that I think about you every day. It's particularly hard at the moment – having Lizzie and wanting desperately to show her off you. I think about you flying those damn planes. It still freaks me out that you can do that y'know! Maybe one day you'll take me out flying? I'd love that – and you'd love showing off how cool you are behind the controls.

Leo grinned. There was something so quintessentially Jed about that statement – always reaching for the sky even though Leo knew for a fact that the reality of being up in the air in a small plane would freak his friend out. Jed was big hearted, kind, and smarter than most people he'd ever met put together, but he was secretly afraid of speed, enclosed spaces, and anything that looked like it might be even vaguely capable of whisking him off into outer space. Leo doubted he'd be able to get Jed to even sit in the cockpit of a Thud, let alone go for a flight in one.

"Hey..." Morelli murmured sleepily beside him, and Leo folded the letter and slipped it back into his pocket. "Did I miss anything?" Morelli asked.

"Nah. They haven't even looked in on us to see how we like the accommodations," Leo told him with a wry grin. "Which is a shame because I'd like to complain about the lack of bedding and a sea-view. Maybe we could ask them to move us to another room?"

Morelli gave a snort of amusement. "How long's it been?" He said.

Leo sighed. "Not nearly as long as it seemed – probably no longer than an hour."

"Is that all?" Morelli bit down hard on his lip. "You were reading your friend's letter?" He asked.

"Yeah." Leo nodded.

"He sounds like a good friend. You miss him?"

"Yeah." More than you'll ever know, he thought.

"I write to my mom but not very often – she complains but what can you do?" Morelli said, spreading his hands in a very Italian gesture. Leo grinned.

"Yeah. I don't write so much either," he said. "Jed...he writes every week." He shook his head. "I used to write back about the same...but not lately."

"Why?"

Leo turned to find Morelli's brown eyes shining feverishly in the semi-dark of their dank, unlit cell.

"I don't know what to say to him any more," he murmured. "Me and Jed – we never had any trouble talking – hell, he's the kind of person who never shuts up." He grinned, promising himself that he would never again roll his eyes at one of Jed's long-winded trivia-fests. If he got out here alive, he'd gladly spend the rest of his life listening to Jed talk - if it meant he'd get to see his friend again, to be with him, and talk to him, and make love to him.

"If you get out of here..." Morelli gazed at him, his forehead glistening with sweat. "Would you tell him about this?"

Leo stared at him for a long time, wondering what Jed's reaction would be to learning he'd been shot down and captured, not wanting to even think about the look that he knew he'd see in Jed's expressive blue eyes.

"I don't know," he murmured. "I really don't know."

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Tuesday Evening

Jed left the office at 7.30 to make sure that everything was in place for the evening, giving Leo stern instructions not to be late. The bedroom looked beautiful when he arrived – the table was set up and there were a few discreet candles burning. Jed had waited until the last minute to tell the chef that Abbey had been called away and therefore he was dining with Leo instead – it wasn't the first time this had happened and nobody thought anything of it. Jed lifted the lid on one of the bright silver platters to inspect the contents and took a little taste – chicken in an oyster sauce, perfectly cooked, with a consistency that melted in the mouth; he couldn't have done better himself he thought with a satisfied smile – well, maybe that wasn't *\*quite\** true as he always thought he could do better himself, but even so, it was pretty good. He was interrupted in this food reverie by a pair of hands sneaking around his waist, and he straightened, startled.

"Leo? I didn't hear you come in!"

"You were too busy trying to find something wrong with the dinner so you could tell me

how much better you'd have cooked it," Leo pointed out, not removing his hands from Jed's waist. Jed grinned at him over his shoulder.

"You know me far too well," he grinned. "Is it my imagination or are you actually early? Usually I have to bribe you to attend anything approaching a romantic meal and where..." He disengaged himself from Leo's grasp and gazed at his friend enquiringly, "...is your cell phone? The cell phone that's usually stuck to your hand so you can receive all those last minute but incredibly urgent calls and to pander to your constant need to be updated by Margaret every 2 seconds?"

"My cellphone's in my pocket," Leo told him, rolling his eyes.

"And there was I thinking you were just pleased to see me," Jed purred lasciviously. Leo sighed, heavily.

"That joke is SO old. Anyway, you'll be pleased to know that my cell is switched off." He grinned at Jed, then reached out, pulled the President close, and delivered a firm kiss to his friend's mouth. Jed went, willing but utterly startled. This wasn't usual Leo-like behaviour. Usually Leo liked to make a huge fuss about having to leave the office early, the over-abundance of candles, and anything else he could gripe about, before they settled into a nice meal, some civilized conversation, and, finally, bed. Bed didn't usually come first – they were a long way past the need to jump on each other the moment they were alone.

"What was that for?" Jed asked as the kiss ended. "Not that I'm complaining but..."

"You looked..." Leo hesitated and then gave a wolfish smile, "...enticing – bending over to taste the food. Now that was a fine sight."

"Hmm." Jed gazed at Leo, puzzled. "Okay," he said uncertainly, thinking it had been a long time since Leo had spoken to him like this. There was a distinct twinkle in his friend's blue eyes that made him tingle all over like he was 17 years old again.

"C'mere." Leo said, and he pulled Jed back for another kiss, his hands exploring Jed's body thoroughly as he opened his friend's lips with his tongue and plundered his mouth with considerable enthusiasm. Jed found himself holding onto Leo's hips for dear life as his friend's energetic probing continued. He finally managed to haul himself back from the brink as Leo's hands began to urgently insinuate themselves down the back of his pants.

"Whoa! Leo!" Jed drew back, fending off Leo's questing hands with his own. "Hey, can't we eat first?" He asked. "Not that I'm not flattered but I'm also hungry, and this food is far too good to waste."

"Hmmm." Leo's hand remained resting on his butt, stroking insistently. "Well I suppose we could eat first but I'm happy to taste a completely different dish right now." His other hand moved to the front of Jed's pants and massaged his cock through the fabric. Jed took a deep breath.

"Leo – we have all night. Let's eat first, okay?"

Leo gazed at him for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay," he said with a shrug. He sat down at the table and Jed served up the meal, chatting away as he did so. It was only when he sat down and started to eat that he realized that Leo had barely said a word. His friend's eyes were following his every move though, in a way that was almost disconcerting – and strangely familiar. Jed tried to remember when he had last seen Leo behave this way; something about Leo's behaviour tonight was jogging a memory, he just couldn't place it. Jed continued talking but it was clear that Leo wasn't interested either in the conversation or in the food. He kept his gaze fixed firmly on Jed, and the President felt that all he had to do was say the word and Leo would leap on him and make love to him. A part of him thrilled to the knowledge that they still had the power to do this to each other after all these years; it reminded him of the early days of their relationship when they'd had to snatch their pleasure wherever and whenever they could, which had led to some interesting encounters in places that made Jed blush now he looked back on it. That had been decades ago though – now they were a little too old for such behaviour and anyway, they had a nice comfortable bed and the knowledge that they wouldn't be disturbed all night. There was no need for any urgency.

"So you're sure you're okay?" Jed asked, in an attempt to entice some chat out of his friend. Leo was always the quieter one of the two of them but he was a good conversationalist and whenever they were alone together the conversation flowed like water. It had always been this way; the fact that they always had so much to say to each other was one of the reasons why they had connected so strongly in the first place. Whenever Jed was away from the White House, he'd make frequent phone calls to Leo, or Leo would call him. Neither of them ever mentioned to the other that they could barely get through a day without talking on the phone; it was just a fact of their relationship.

"I'm fine." Leo sat back in his chair, gazing at Jed as if he wanted to devour him. Jed noticed that he'd only pushed his food around his plate.

"Because...you know, after what happened when you had the flu a couple of months ago, I wanted to be sure..."

"I'm not going to collapse in the Oval Office again," Leo interrupted, with a roll of his eyes. "I just ate something funny that's all."

"Nobody else got sick," Jed pointed out. "You ate something from the cafeteria right?"

"I was unlucky." Leo shrugged.

"Okay." Jed gazed at Leo suspiciously; he had the disconcerting feeling that Leo wasn't being honest with him, but if Leo wouldn't tell him what was really going on then he couldn't make him. However, long years of dealing with Leo had given him some ideas on how to manage his friend. Leo was a patient man – far more patient than Jed – so waiting him out wasn't really an option. However, what Jed lacked in patience he more than made up for in determination; he'd hang on in here until he saw a chink in Leo's armour and then he'd

make his move.

Leo had moves of his own he wanted to make – and the minute they finished their coffee he got up, went over to Jed's chair, and placed his hands on his friend's shoulders. Jed experienced that familiar Leo tingle as his friend began to run his hands down his arms, and he felt Leo's warm breath on the back of his neck, and then a familiar wetness as Leo licked him there, sending arousal shooting through every nerve in Jed's body. Jed couldn't help it – it always turned him on when Leo was this enthusiastic about sex and he loved how arousing Leo still found his body. It was one of those things that he'd been embarrassed about for many years, and, while he was long since over that sense of shyness, when Leo was this insistent Jed was still a little freaked out by how much he enjoyed it. He made a little sound and began to move away from the table but Leo grasped his arms firmly in his hands.

"Stay there," he whispered in Jed's ear. "I want to undress you."

"Over the dinner table?" Jed queried, trying to make a joke of it and failing as his choking voice betrayed how turned on he was by that thought.

"Yeah. I want to get you out of that suit, out of being the President, and make you squeal."

"I don't..." Jed began but it was too late to protest as Leo's hand slid down the front of his pants and caressed his hardening cock. "Squeal!" He finished in what was a distinct squeal.

"Sure you don't," Leo whispered, sounding darkly seductive, as if a stranger had taken over Leo's body and was now making love to Jed in his place.

Jed did a half-turn, and glanced at his friend over his shoulder, but Leo didn't seem to be there. He looked like he did when he'd been drinking – back in the days when he used to drink. There was almost a mask in place, and the usual calm, good natured Leo that Jed knew so well was hidden behind it. Jed was turned on and startled in equal measure. He knew Leo, his Leo, wouldn't do anything to hurt him, but all the same there was something edgy about the situation.

"Leo..." he began, but he didn't get a chance to say anything else as Leo grabbed his face and subjected him to a long, passionate kiss. His hands wandered urgently over Jed's body as he kissed him, and when he finished Jed didn't have time to draw breath as Leo pulled him to his feet, his fingers ripping at the buttons on Jed's shirt while his lips went back in for another steamy kiss. Jed kissed him back this time; it was impossible to resist Leo when he was this focused on sex, and Jed was finding it too thrilling to want to stop his friend, although the nagging thought remained, at the back of his mind, that this was unusual behaviour for Leo, and that memory tantalized him again, just out of reach.

Leo had Jed undressed in microseconds, and then he bundled him physically over to the bed. Jed wasn't any lightweight, but Leo was sinewy and his strength, when he chose to display it, always took Jed by surprise. He pushed Jed onto the bed and then climbed on top



of him and began making love to Jed, passionately and urgently. Jed sighed, loving every second. He wrapped his arms around Leo's back and returned his friend's kisses with passionate ones of his own, but Leo wanted more. He raged over Jed's body like a tempest, kissing, licking, biting and sucking until Jed did exactly what Leo had predicted and started squealing and mewling with pleasure. Their frenzied love making seemed to go on for hours – Jed wasn't sure he had the stamina to keep up with the pace his friend was setting but Leo was relentless. At some point, and Jed wasn't sure when as everything seemed to pass in a blur of hazy pleasure, Leo found the condoms and lube that were kept stowed in the nightstand, and then he was kneeling between Jed's thighs and the next thing Jed knew his legs were over Leo's shoulders and Leo was entering him, urgently, his movements fast and needy. Jed lay back and gave into the utter bliss of the sensation. He didn't think he'd ever tire of this; from the very first time they'd ever made love, leaving his entire body boneless with pleasure, he had loved it. Jed gazed up at Leo as his friend thrust into him, and it struck him that Leo was still wearing that mask. His friend's eyes were glazed over, and he wasn't looking at him the way he usually did; usually he gazed down on Jed with a look of fond affection in his eyes, but tonight – tonight he looked...lost. There was no other word for it. He looked as if he wasn't even there, as if he was miles away, and yet at the same time he seemed oddly vulnerable and desperate.

"Hey, slow down...we have all night," Jed whispered, reaching out a hand to caress the side of Leo's face and draw his friend back to him. Leo looked startled, and then grinned.

"Going too fast for you, old man?" He teased.

"No, I'm just saying – we can take our time. What's the rush?" Jed pointed out as Leo thrust back into him with another fast movement of his hips.

"No rush...just that we might want to do this all over again later," Leo said with a wolfish smile.

Jed gazed at him in surprise; usually once in a night was all they managed these days but Leo clearly had other ideas.

"Okay, you're really putting me through my paces," he grumbled amiably.

"Can't keep up?" Leo panted.

"Wondering what the headlines would look like if you collapsed of a heart attack and died on me at this precise moment in time," Jed pointed out. "Leo...you usually like to take things slow..." He was panting himself throughout this speech but Leo ignored him. His hand was wrapped urgently around Jed's cock, and he pumped away until neither of them was able to hang on any longer and they both came. Leo collapsed on top of him, and they lay there for a very long time, getting their breath back. Then Leo shifted and withdrew from him, before wrapping his arms around Jed's body. He rested his face on Jed's chest, and, with a little sigh, closed his eyes. Jed's hands came to rest on Leo's back, and he gazed down at his friend, still surprised. Leo was clinging onto him like a drowning man clutching a rock, as if he was genuinely scared that Jed might disappear. What on earth had tonight's frenzied love

making been about, Jed wondered? He stroked Leo's back gently, picking up a feeling of intense vulnerability from his friend that he couldn't help but respond to, although Leo didn't say a word. Something was bothering him though, judging by the way he had his arms wrapped so tightly around Jed's body.

"Hey, we should talk," Jed murmured softly.

"I'm too tired to talk. That was great wasn't it? It was great," Leo replied in one of his typical avoidance strategies that Jed was familiar with after 40 years of intimacy. He wondered for a moment whether Leo had been drinking again; was that why he had been sick the previous day? He hadn't smelled any alcohol on his friend's breath, either yesterday or today, but was that it?

"Leo," he said softly. "Did you fall off the wagon?"

Leo glanced up at him, a surprised look in his sharp, evasive blue eyes. "No." He shook his head and then laid it to rest on Jed's naked chest once more. Jed squeezed him comfortingly with his arms.

"You can tell me," he said encouragingly.

"I haven't been drinking, Jed. I just wanted to make love to you tonight – what the hell is wrong with that?" Leo snapped. "You didn't seem to have any objections ten minutes ago."

"And I don't have any now. It's just...you don't seem yourself."

"I'm fine," Leo told him, but he wrapped his arms even tighter around Jed's body, as if he feared he was going to be swept out to sea and Jed was the only thing holding him anchored in a safe harbour.

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### Chapter 3 by Xanthe

1970

A couple of hours after Leo's arrival, the door finally opened and a small group of VC entered the room, led by a man wearing an NVA uniform. He also wore a pair of round, iron rimmed glasses with almost comically thick lenses, making him look more like a bureaucrat than a soldier.

"Your names please," he said in almost perfect English, glancing at his prisoners.

"I'm Captain McGarry and this is Lieutenant Morelli." Leo got to his feet, ignoring the sharp stabbing pain in his back. This man looked as if he was in charge – maybe he could be

reasoned with. "Lieutenant Morelli has a broken leg – he's in urgent need of medical attention..." he began but he didn't get any further as the bespectacled man barked an order and one of the guards accompanying him stepped forward and hit Leo hard across the jaw. Leo went flying backwards, and landed on the hard floor with a resounding thud.

"You will not speak except to answer the questions I ask you," the man said in clipped tones. There was a kind of cold, controlled fury about him. Leo put his hand up to his jaw, and tried to massage the ache out of it.

"He's got a broken leg," he said quietly. "He needs a doctor." That comment earned him a kick in the ribs, and then the bespectacled man stood over him, studying Leo from behind the thick lenses covering his eyes, assessing him coldly.

"You should listen. When I say something I mean it. You'll have your chance to talk to me later during your interrogation," he said with a chilling smile. "For now – I think Lieutenant Morelli might have something he wishes to say to us."

He motioned to the guards accompanying him, and they grabbed Morelli and dragged him roughly out of the room. The Lieutenant was trying to be brave but he gave a yelp of pure agony as his injured leg was jostled. Leo watched him go in silent despair; he had a pretty good idea what they would do to Morelli, and it sure as hell didn't involve having a doctor take look at his leg. There was nothing he could do about it, but his stomach crawled in sympathy for the young man, and in fear of what might happen to him next. His body ached all over, from the new blows and the ones he'd already received, and there was nothing to do but curl up against the wall again. He remembered Jed's letter and pulled it out, needing something besides what Morelli was likely going through to focus on right now.

Politically, I'm really uneasy with the Nixon administration. After those secret bombings in Cambodia I wonder what other stuff he might be hiding – or what he might be capable of doing. I won't deny that I'm in favour of his policy of withdrawing us from Vietnam, if only for the entirely selfish reason that I'd get you back again.

"I'm with you there, Jed," he murmured, wondering whether, if they did withdraw from this war, it would be too late for him.

Last night, lying there in the dark with Lizzie on my chest, I kept myself awake by thinking of you. I wondered if it was possible that you could hear me, wherever you are. I know - it was probably day time in 'Nam and you were out fighting but I felt very close to you. I think about you a lot because of where you are and what you're doing. I wish you were here with us, back home and safe. We hear such terrible stories, and sometimes I lie awake at night worrying about the fact that you're out there, so far away from your home and the people who love you. Abbey just leaned over and agreed with me there, so it's not just me being incurably sentimental, old friend.

Leo gave a little snort. Jed *was* incurably sentimental, and even more so in his letters than in person. He wasn't pleased that Jed was having sleepless nights over him, but a little part of his heart did glow at the fact that he was so obviously missed – and would be so clearly

welcomed on his return. If he returned.

I've been thinking about that vacation we spent touring around in your old beater of a car. I've led a sheltered life and that Summer you showed me an America I didn't even know existed. It was great meeting your mom and sisters too – speaking of which, your mom sent us a trunk-load of clothes for Lizzie – which, frankly, was a godsend.

"Good old mom," Leo murmured out loud. He could imagine her seizing on any piece of good news, even one as tenuous as the birth of his god-daughter. She loved helping people out and he could imagine her delight on being able to send clothes for little Lizzie Bartlet. He smiled as he remembered the vacation Jed was talking about. How he wished, more than anything, that he could turn the clock back to that vacation, before Jed had married and he'd left to fight in this war. He could still remember beer soaked kisses with Jed as they'd camped out in a field in the middle of nowhere, and the feel of Jed's thick, dark hair under his hand as he made love to him. The thought was a good one, but so entirely at odds with his current desperate predicament that it brought him up short. He wrapped his arms around his knees in the cold, dank cell, and just sat there, staring into space.

He didn't know how much time passed but next thing he knew there was a rattling sound outside, and then the door opened and Morelli was thrown back into the room, moaning incoherently with pain. Leo got up and felt sick when he saw that the handkerchief wrapped around the wound on Morelli's leg was soaked with new blood.

"You fucking bastards," he hissed. "You can see the kind of pain he's in - don't you have any humanity?"

"Ah, humanity. You Americans seem to think you have a monopoly on that commodity," the bespectacled interrogator snapped. "You might like to ask the women in our villages who you have raped, and the men you have tortured and killed, what Americans understand by humanity," he snarled. Leo gazed at him in wordless dismay and the man shook his head. "Tell your Lieutenant to think about what we asked him. We'll be back for him in a couple of hours." And with that he turned and left the room, taking his entourage of guards with him.

There was nothing Leo could do for Morelli except try and make him more comfortable. The kid was half delirious anyway, and his forehead was slick with sweat. Leo sat back against the wall, and cradled Morelli's head on his lap, which was the only available pillow in the place.

"Franco – listen to me," he said urgently. "Tell them something next time – make something up – they won't know if it's true or not - but tell them something."

Morelli shook his head, his eyes shining too brightly.

"That's an order, Lieutenant," Leo said briskly. "It isn't just me saying it – it's our orders, remember?" Morelli moved his head and gazed at Leo blankly, and Leo doubted the young man remembered anything very much of his training right now. "The new code of conduct, Lieutenant," he said briskly, "instructs us that our first duty is to stay alive, so long as doing

so does not directly harm US troops. So I'm ordering you to stay alive, Lieutenant."

Morelli gave a ghostly little grin. "I don't remember that from the movies, Captain," he whispered. Leo shook his head.

"I've got news for you, Lieutenant, we aren't in the goddamn movies," he replied. "Okay...let me give you a little history lesson..." He leaned back, smiling wryly to himself as he thought how much he sounded like Jed. He wondered if this was the kind of thing Jed would do in these circumstances and decided it was, and that encouraged him. "Back in Korea..." he began, keeping his hand pressed to Morelli's neck to ensure that he could still feel a pulse, "when a soldier was captured, he was instructed to only give his name, rank and serial number. You still with me, Franco?"

"Hmmm?" Morelli gazed at him blearily and then nodded. "Yeah," he muttered.

"The men were brave - they did their damndest to obey, went through all kinds of torture...but inevitably some of them cracked – and when that happened, they cracked badly." He squinted down at Morelli, whose breathing was becoming a little calmer. "So, they amended the rules. Lieutenant, you don't have to hold out forever – the expectation is that a prisoner will hold out as long as possible, and that's made easier if you give out small bits of information, so long as it doesn't directly compromise the health and safety of American forces. You hearing me, Morelli? This is what they're telling us to do. It's an order."

Morelli managed a faded grin. "Yessir," he said softly.

"What did they ask you?" Leo pressed gently.

"Stuff about the squadron...where we were flying from...whether we had any new weapons they didn't know about. They kept whaling on my leg..." He shuddered, and the sweat poured slickly off his face. "Christ it hurt. Mr. Magoo kept on and on, asking me the same fucking stuff over and over again, but mostly I was screaming too much to reply. "

"Mr. Magoo?" Leo frowned.

"Guy with the glasses..." Morelli gestured to his face. "Such cold fucking eyes...didn't even blink when I screamed."

"Mr. Magoo." Leo chuckled. "Suits the bastard."

They were quiet for a long time. Morelli slipped in and out of consciousness and Leo watched over him, but all too soon he heard clanging in the corridor, the door was opened, and the newly christened Mr. Magoo entered. Leo disengaged himself from Morelli and stood up.

"If you torture him again you'll kill him," he said. "Take me this time."

Mr. Magoo surveyed him, those cold eyes of his unblinking behind his glasses. He studied Leo intently, as if Leo interested him in some way and then broke into that chilling smile, and inclined his head.

"With pleasure, Captain McGarry."

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Tuesday Night

They must have dozed off because next thing Jed knew, Leo was snuggled up behind him, his hands gently wandering over Jed's body, and Jed could feel a familiar hardness pressing against his ass.

"Hey, you're awake," Leo murmured. "Ready for dessert?"

"I thought we just *had* dessert," Jed replied, glancing at his friend over his shoulder.

"Who said we can't have second helpings?" Leo lowered his face to Jed's shoulder and nipped a series of little kisses along his skin.

"Okay...but slowly this time," Jed chided him.

"Ah, I knew it – you can't keep up, old man," Leo teased, his hands wandering over Jed's body, arousing him.

"No, I'm just a little sore after last time," Jed replied. Leo's hands stopped their wandering.

"I'm sorry. We don't have to if you don't want..." Leo began.

"I'm fine to go again – I can keep up with *you* any time, old friend," Jed told him tartly, "but I'm just saying go slow, that's all."

"Okay." Leo's warm, wet mouth claimed the back of his neck again, sending shivers down his spine, and a few seconds later he felt his friend's coolly lubed finger slip inside him. He sighed and opened up, enjoying the unexpected second wind they were having. Jed always found Leo's enthusiasm for sex arousing, and Leo seemed tireless tonight, possessed of a strange kind of nervous energy and a desire, it would seem, to be as close to Jed as he possibly could. Jed gave a little gasp of pleasure as Leo's cock took the place of his fingers and he rocked gently, slowly, all the way in, making Jed feel filled, and stimulating his nerve endings all over again.

"Good?" Leo whispered, bestowing a kiss on Jed's shoulder.

"Mmmm," Jed sighed. He glanced back over his shoulder and found that the mask Leo had worn earlier was gone, to be replaced by an honesty of expression that took Jed by surprise. Leo was making love to him as if he thought Jed was a feast that might be snatched away, as

if he wanted to be joined with Jed forever, to be as close to him as it was humanly possible to be. Jed turned his head back, startled by what he had just seen written so clearly on Leo's face. He surrendered himself to the sensation of his friend making love to him with exquisite tenderness, savouring every slow, measured thrust, every gentle caress of Leo's questing fingers on his skin, every loving kiss bestowed on the back of his neck and, after they both came, Leo didn't withdraw but stayed there, his arms wrapped tightly around Jed's body again.

"I love you, Jed," Leo murmured as they lay there hazily, enjoying the moment, worn out and sated, tingling with contentment. Jed placed his hands on Leo's, where they were wrapped around his waist, frowning as he did so. He had no objection to being told he was loved but again, it wasn't a very Leo thing to do. Not that his friend had never said those words to him because he had, but they knew they loved each other and had done for a very long time, and it wasn't something they said all that often, except in passing, or as a joke.

"I love you too, Leo," Jed replied, because the moment seemed to require some response from him. "You do know that though, right?"

Leo snorted and Jed felt his lips brush his shoulder again. "Yeah. Just checking. It's been awhile...and you were the one who said something about not taking each other for granted."

"I had no idea you listen to what I say," Jed replied. "I'm amazed."

Leo squeezed him reprovingly. "I listen to everything you say – that's why my brain is crammed full of so much clutter, and why I know far too many biblical quotes off by heart," he grumbled.

Jed gave a little grin; this was more familiar territory. Maybe he'd been wrong after all. Maybe everything was fine, and Leo had just been feeling extra-frisky tonight. Relaxing, he closed his eyes and fell fast asleep, with Leo still buried deep inside him, and Leo's arms wrapped around him, holding him tight and keeping him close.

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1970

They took him down a corridor, covered in peeling paint, and threw him into a room. Leo balked in the doorway; this place was a torture chamber, no doubt about it. There was a steel bath in one corner of the room, filled with water, but he was pretty sure it wasn't there for bathing purposes. Meat hooks hung from the ceiling, and there were old medieval type irons and manacles around the room. At one end of the room was a table, covered in a cloth, and Mr. Magoo went and sat behind it. Leo was pushed forward and made to sit on a small, concrete block, low on the floor, and he found himself looking up into the eyes of his interrogator, half hidden as they were behind the thick lenses of his glasses. A big man came into the room and stood behind him, and the door clanged ominously shut. Leo swallowed hard; whatever his training and however cocky he'd been as a pilot, safe within the cockpit

of his plane, here, now, he felt as if he had been stripped to his bare bones – and somehow he had the feeling that he was soon going to find out more about what kind of man Leo McGarry was than he had ever wanted to know.

"Captain McGarry, I hope you will co-operate with me." Mr Magoo treated him to another of those chilling smiles. "We're a civilized people, Captain, so if you tell us what we want to know, I can promise you that you won't be hurt."

"And if I don't?" Leo gave a smile of his own. He had thought about this over the past few hours, and it seemed to him that his best option was to pretend to co-operate – but make up everything he said. He had no intention of giving away real military information, and there was no point in cracking too soon – Mr. Magoo clearly wasn't stupid and wasn't likely to be fooled if he did that. On the other hand, his captor hadn't performed more than a cursory search of his prisoners, or stripped them of their flight suits and boots and replaced them with striped prisoner uniforms or the infamous Vietnamese black pyjamas, so Leo wondered whether he was new to his trade, or whether this camp was too makeshift to be that organised, all of which was to his advantage. Leo had decided on a strategy – which had been easy enough sitting in his cell, but now that he was here, in this torture chamber, he was starting to wonder whether the cost of survival might be higher than he was prepared to pay.

Mr. Magoo nodded his head at the large man behind him, and Leo felt his arms grabbed, and then bound so tightly at the wrists that his hands turned instantly white as the circulation was cut off. He gave an anguished roar as he was lifted up off the ground and attached to one of the meat hooks in the ceiling. His arms felt as if they were being tugged half out of his sockets and his wounded shoulder and back exploded in pain.

"Tell us your targets, Captain. Tomorrow's targets, and for the rest of the week," Mr. Magoo said bluntly, those thick lensed glasses of his rendering his cold dark eyes even more sinister.

Leo gave an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry – I honestly don't know. They don't tell us," he said, and before he'd even finished speaking, he saw the big man move, out of the corner of his eye, and pick up what looked like an old helicopter fan belt. He swung it hard across Leo's body and Leo gave a bellow of pure pain as the force of the blow wrenched his bound arms even more. The sound of rubber hitting torso reverberated around the room as the beating continued, until Leo wasn't sure how long he could hold out, or how long he should pretend to hold out in order for his 'capitulation' to look real. He could take the heavy blows but the pain of being tied in this position was far worse – he couldn't even begin to rationalize it. The physical agony mushroomed in his mind, filling every single sense until it was all he was aware of. At some point, mercifully, he lost consciousness – only to be brought to a couple of seconds later by a bucketful of cold water.

"So..." Mr. Magoo sat back in his chair and smiled at him. "Those targets, Captain. Maybe you've remembered them?"

"Yeah..." Leo whispered. "I remember now."



"Your arms hurt – you'd like me to order you to be cut down now," Mr. Magoo commented.

"Yeah," Leo croaked.

"Give me the information, and then I'll give the order."

Leo licked his dry lips. "Okay." He hoped he could give them enough to satisfy them, hoped they wouldn't realize he was lying, because he had no other strategy to fall back on. This was it – if they didn't buy it then he didn't have any other ideas for how to get out of this alive, or even halfway sane. He gave his 'information' slowly, finding it hard enough to concentrate on talking, let alone the effort it required to make up convincing lies. Finally, he finished, and waited, expectantly. Mr. Magoo smiled at him, and got up.

"Thank you, Captain," he murmured, coming so close that Leo got a good look into those cold, brown eyes. He studied Leo intently, in that unnerving way he had, until Leo wondered what the hell he was looking for.

"You're gonna let me down?" Leo asked.

"No." Mr. Magoo smiled.

"But I told you...I fucking told you..." Leo began, twisting in his bonds, unsure that he could stand a second more of the terrible, wrenching pain.

"It's very interesting information, Captain. I'm going to pass it on, and check on its likely validity."

He nodded to the big man, and then, with another cold glance in Leo's direction, he left the room. Leo bit back his howl of despair, and threw his head back, feeling the sweat pour into his eyes as he tried to find some way of relieving the terrible pressure on his shoulder joints. It was then, in that moment, that he realized it didn't matter what he said – this wasn't about information, although they'd take that if they could get it, but no, this was about making him realize who was in charge and how small, helpless and completely abandoned to his fate he was out here. This was psychological warfare as much as anything else and he was nothing to them – just another American prisoner, another body to beat and torture, another man's screams to ignore or enjoy.

He saw the big man reach for the rubber fan belt once more, and a few seconds later the beating started all over again, tearing into his body with a terrible thudding, resounding pain, and soon it wasn't possible to bite back anything and he howled out loud, and surrendered to the dark chasm of his own agony.

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## Chapter 4 by Xanthe

Wednesday Early Morning

Jed was woken by a low, guttural sound. He sat up and glanced around, disoriented.

"Abbey?" He murmured, and then realized he was in one of the guest bedrooms, and his companion was not his wife but his oldest and closest friend. Leo who had moved away from him at some point in the night, and was now curled up on his side, making strange sounds in the back of his throat.

"Leo?" He said gently, switching on the lamp. He leaned over to peer at his friend who started thrashing around wildly. "Leo," he said again, and then he ducked quickly as Leo flung an arm around as if he was being attacked. This wasn't the first time Leo had had nightmares; Jed was prone to insomnia, and he'd often sat up reading during various nights over the years and heard Leo quivering or crying out in his sleep. Usually he'd stroke Leo's hair gently and his friend would calm down – Jed never mentioned it in the morning because he was pretty sure that Leo didn't even know it had happened. Just occasionally the nightmares had been enough to wake Leo, but those occasions had been pretty rare. This was obviously a full blown night terror, and Jed was worried that Leo might start screaming – in which case it was very likely that his security detail would burst in and find them sharing a bed, something he most definitely did *\*not\** want to happen. Leo made a choking, heart-rending sound in the back of his throat, as if he was being throttled, and Jed was now seriously concerned. Whatever kind of nightmare this was, it was a bad one. He reached out, gently, to caress Leo's hair, hoping this would soothe his friend back to a more peaceful sleep, only to find his wrist grabbed and then snapped back and squeezed with ferocious force.

"Shit! Leo, it's me!" He hissed urgently. Leo's eyes flashed open but Jed couldn't see *\*Leo\** in them. His friend was clearly still in the grip of the nightmare, and his eyes were desperate, almost crazy.

"Keep your fucking hands off me," Leo hissed. "Or I'll break your fucking wrist." He illustrated his point by twisting Jed's wrist painfully over his head, his whole body weight pressing down on Jed's body. "You're not going to fucking hurt me again, you bastard," he snarled.

"Leo," Jed said, trying to think clearly which was hard when his wrist felt like it was caught in a vice. "You need to wake up now. It's okay. It's me – Jed. You're okay. Just breathe and take a look around you."

He kept talking, softly, gently, calmly, not making any moves that might inflame the situation further, and then slowly, gradually, he saw reality seep back into Leo's eyes as his friend finally woke up and realized where he was.

"Jed?" Leo said uncertainly, and he sounded so confused that Jed's heart went out to him.

"Yes. It's okay. It's me," Jed told him gently. "You're okay. You're safe. Nobody's trying to hurt you."

"No...I...shit!" Leo released his vicious hold on Jed's wrist and rolled off him, and Jed gave a sigh of relief and quickly grabbed the injured arm, bringing it close to his chest and nestling it there. "Fuck!" Leo snapped, and then, without warning, he disentangled himself from both Jed and the sheets that he had become twisted in, half-jumped, half-fell off the bed, and disappeared into the en suite bathroom, leaving Jed sitting on the bed, still nursing his injured wrist. Jed wasn't sure what he should do next so he sat there, wondering what the hell had just happened. A few seconds later he heard the unmistakable sound of vomiting coming from the bathroom, and he got up and tried to open the door, only to find that it was locked.

"Leo...are you okay?" He asked, knocking.

"I'm fine," came back the inevitable reply. Jed heard the sound of the shower running and then a few minutes later a damp but clean Leo came to the door and unlocked it. He looked terrible – his face was pale, and his eyes had a haunted look in them. "I should be asking you that question," he said softly, standing in front of Jed, his eyes downcast and ashamed. "Did I hurt you?" He made no move to touch Jed but his gaze raked over him, coming to rest on the wrist that Jed was still clutching.

"No...just scared the hell out of me," Jed replied, meaning it.

"You – scared?" Leo gave a faded smile. "You're never scared of anything. Besides, you have men with guns standing just down the hall."

"You think I'd let them come in here and shoot you?" Jed asked softly.

"Maybe you should. I'm sorry for...I'm sorry." He looked devastated, and brushed awkwardly past Jed and into the other room, where he reached for the clothes that he'd discarded in such a hurry the previous night, and began getting dressed.

"Wait a minute – where the hell are you going?" Jed asked, grabbing his bath robe and slipping it on.

"It's nearly 5. Might as well call it a night and get to the office," Leo shrugged, finding his shirt and shouldering himself into it.

"Leo...you can't just run out on me without telling me what's going on here!" Jed remonstrated.

"I had a nightmare," Leo said, glancing around the dimly lit room, looking for other discarded garments. "You know I have nightmares occasionally. I've had them before. I'll have them again. It's no big deal," he told Jed in a warning tone of voice.

"You've never attacked me in your sleep before, and you've never vomited after a

nightmare either," Jed pointed out. "Or at least only once," he added softly and meaningfully, remembering their 1970 anniversary. "So I think that \*is\* a big deal. What was the nightmare about, Leo? You never have told me what your nightmares are about – I always just assumed..." He hesitated, and then decided to plough on regardless. "I assumed they're about Vietnam," he said softly. Leo didn't even blink. He located his socks, sat down on the side of the bed, and began pulling them on, ignoring his friend completely. "Leo – I want an answer," Jed told him in a firm voice. Leo glanced up at him blankly.

"What? Oh. Yeah...I don't remember, Jed," he replied with a shrug. "I never remember 'em when I wake up."

"I don't believe you," Jed said in a hard tone, gazing at Leo with narrowed eyes. "What was going through your mind when you had me pinned there in an arm lock for god's sake? Who did you think you were talking to when you threatened to break my wrist? And when you said you wouldn't let them hurt you again? What was that about? Who hurt you, Leo? And when?"

"I just told you – I don't remember." Leo found his pants and pulled them towards him with jerky, shaky movements of his hand. Something fell out of the pocket, and Jed picked it up.

"What's this?" He asked, recognizing it as the scrap of paper that Leo had been reading so intently earlier. It was yellowed with age, creased to the point of falling apart, and covered in stains.

"It's nothing. Give it to me." Leo held out his hand. Jed frowned, and glanced more closely at the grimy piece of paper.

"This is my handwriting," he said, confused.

"It's an old letter you sent me," Leo told him. "I found it when I was clearing out some of my stuff." He gave a nonchalant shrug. "Thought I'd re-read it."

"January 6th, 1970." Jed glanced at Leo. "Boy, that \*is\* old. What a blast from the past. Can I read it?"

"No," Leo said, too fast.

"Why the hell not? I wrote the damn thing." Jed sat down on the side of the bed and unfolded the letter gingerly.

"Because I'm asking you not to," Leo said, his tone almost strangled.

"Maybe I can remember what it says..." Jed murmured with a little grin.

"I doubt it – you wrote me letters every week at that time so there's no reason why you'd remember this particular one," Leo snapped. "There's nothing special about it."

"Oh I don't know. It strikes me there must be \*something\* special about it – if this is the one you kept after all these years," Jed murmured, gazing at Leo thoughtfully.

"I kept them all – this is just the one I found when I was clearing out, like I said," Leo replied, holding out his hand again for the letter.

"Perhaps I could hang onto it for a few days. Show it to Abbey," Jed suggested.

"No!" Leo said, in an almost angry tone of voice.

"Why not?" Jed pushed. This was the chink in Leo's armour that he'd been hoping to find; he was sure this letter held some kind of clue as to what was going on with Leo right now, although he had no idea what it meant or why Leo was behaving so strangely about it.

"Because I need it," Leo said, and then he clearly realized how ridiculous that sounded and he took a deep breath, stood up, and started pulling on his pants. "Fine, keep it if you want," he said. "I was just looking forward to re-reading it. That's all."

"This was the letter I sent telling you about Liz's birth, isn't it?" Jed said, trying to make out the faded lettering in the dimly lit room, without his glasses.

"Yes," Leo said in a tight kind of voice.

"Looks like it got kinda dirty," Jed said, pointing out the long, dark streaks that were splashed liberally over the creased paper, almost obscuring the writing.

"That isn't dirt," Leo growled. "It's blood."

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1970

Leo woke to hear someone moaning. He was lying on the floor of his cell, and it took him several minutes to figure out that the person moaning was himself. He clamped his jaw down hard to stop the noise. His arms felt as if they had been torn out of the sockets, and his entire body ached from the beatings.

"Captain," a hoarse voice said. "You alive?"

"Yeah...I'm alive," he croaked back. "Fucking, fucking, son of a bitch..." He tried to slowly uncurl his body but everything hurt too much, and he gave a low hiss of pain as he moved.

"I thought they might not bring you back," Morelli said. Leo finally managed to raise his head enough to glance at the other man. Shit, but the kid looked terrible – his face was ashen, and his lips almost blue in hue. Leo wished he could crawl over to the wall to be with him, but he couldn't get his body to respond to even the simplest of commands, so he just lay there. "I thought one time they \*did\* bring you back," Morelli said. "Wasn't sure. Not

sure if you're really here now."

"I am," Leo told him. He rested his head back down on the cool floor and closed his eyes, longing for the peaceful oblivion of unconsciousness. It didn't come.

"I was thinking about my mom," Morelli whispered. "I'd tell her what happened to me here, Captain. I couldn't not tell her...She'd take one fucking look at me and see it...see it in my eyes...and I'm not fucking strong enough to hide it from her. I'd let her fuss over me, just if I could get to see her again...I'd let her bring me bowls of pasta and kiss my hair. She shouldn't know this happened to me, Captain, but I know I'd tell her."

Leo sighed. "Yeah," he whispered.

"Would you tell your mom?" Morelli asked.

Leo thought about it for a long time, just for something to think about other than how much he hurt. "I dunno. I don't think so," he said eventually. "She hasn't had such a great life. I wouldn't want her to know about this. She's always relied on me...they all have. I don't want them to think of me like this."

"You're stronger than me, Captain," Morelli whispered. "And your friend? The one with the baby? Would you tell him?"

Leo closed his eyes and thought of Jed's bright blue eyes and thick dark hair. He thought of how good Jed's kisses tasted, and how his skin felt under his caressing fingers. God, he loved Jed's tanned skin, and the way his muscles moved beneath it when they were making love. They were friends, closer than friends had any right to be, and yet they both had secrets. They'd talked into the night, had shared with each other parts of themselves that they had shared with nobody else, and yet he knew they still kept some parts of themselves hidden, for whatever reason. He remembered how he had found out that Jed's father was beating him, how Jed had wanted to hide it from him, how he was still profoundly uncomfortable with Leo knowing about it to the point where they could barely talk about it without arguing. Leo imagined telling Jed about this, about what had happened to him here, and recoiled instantly from the mental image. This would wound Jed almost more than himself; his friend would want to help but would feel helpless, and that would make him frustrated and angry. He could imagine the look of sheer pain that he would see in Jed's blue eyes and knew it was a sight he never wanted to witness, or be the cause of. What possible good would it do for Jed to know what had happened to him here, what was very likely going to continue happening for a long time? And there was something else, a little voice that told him Jed wouldn't want to be burdened with his friend's pain at a time in his life when he was so happy. Jed had found Abbey, they'd had a baby...and Leo wasn't sure what place there was for him in his friend's life any more. The last thing he wanted to do was to make Jed feel sorry for him, or as if he had any responsibility for Leo. He didn't want to be a burden on his friend; he never wanted that.

"No," he muttered at last. "I'll never tell him about this." With enormous effort he moved his arms, struggling through the waves of pain that assaulted him as he did so, and finally

managed to stretch out the abused muscles enough to reach into his pocket and pull out Jed's letter.

Leo, there are other things I wish I could say, as always, but you know that. When I see you again (June 17th???) I'll lock you in a room and say it all - I think you know the kind of stuff I mean and you're probably pretty damn grateful that you're miles away so you don't have to endure the full, unedited, Jed Bartlet spiel. Just to let you know that right at this moment in time I'm remembering what we said and did one particular summer night in Michigan. I hope that's as...uh, inspiring a memory for you as it is for me.

Damn – I just re-read this letter and it's almost illegible. I hope you can read it – my hair got so long that I keep pushing it out of my eyes - Abbey usually cuts it but she's got other things on her mind right now so it'll have to wait.

I can't think of any more news. I've probably said enough anyway – I can see you rolling your eyes and wondering when I'm going to stop...but hell, just 'cause you aren't here in person doesn't mean you should escape.

Write soon – d'you hear? I want to know what's going on with you. I miss you.

All my love,

Jed.

Leo held the letter tightly in his fist and closed his eyes. He thought of Jed, sitting at the rickety old kitchen table in the tiny apartment he shared with Abbey, writing this letter, his overgrown hair flopping into his eyes. Leo felt a wave of longing so strong it almost convulsed him and he unfurled the letter from his hand and rested his face against it, as if by being close to this symbol of Jed he could somehow will himself into his lover's arms. He fell asleep, the letter pressed against his cheek, and when he woke up he had to peel it away from his sweaty skin. It was already starting to look tattered after what he'd been through these past few days, so he folded it carefully and then tucked it into his boot with hands that felt and moved like rubber, where he thought maybe it would be safer. He already knew most of it by heart, but that wasn't the point. It was the action of reading that familiar, sloping hand writing that somehow soothed him, and made this nightmare he was living even halfway bearable.

He growled with pain and anger when they lifted him to his feet and dragged him back to the interrogation room again a few hours later. Mr. Magoo was already seated at the table, and his eyes flashed angrily behind his glasses as Leo was thrown down in front of him.

"You lied to me, Captain McGarry," he said, in cold, clipped tones. Leo managed to drag himself into a crouching position and gazed at his tormentor blearily. He gave a half smile, and shrugged. They were going to hurt him anyway, whether he talked or not, whether he told the truth or not, so there was nothing to be gained or lost in this room. He'd keep his knowledge to himself, and let them do their worst.

"Did I?" He said, his lips twisting in a parody of amusement. Mr. Magoo glared at him, his eyes darkening behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

"You think this is funny, Captain?" He asked.

"No. I think it's fucking hell – that's why I'm laughing," Leo told him, grinning inanely, wondering if he'd lost his mind.

He gritted his teeth as they pulled his arms behind his back, triggering a dozen different points of pain in his tortured body, and then he felt his hands being tied, and he suddenly knew, with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, what they were going to do next. He thought of Jed, remembered the letter and a summer night in Michigan when they had made love 6 times – a personal best for both of them. He laughed out loud then; he was pretty sure that Jed had mentioned that occasion in order to give him a subtle jerk off fantasy, and there was zero chance of that working in his current circumstances, but all the same, there was something incongruously funny about kneeling here, his arms tied behind his back, prior to being put through the most excruciating agony, and remembering having beautiful, mind blowing sex all night long with his best friend. And it had been, literally, all night long, from sunset 'til sunrise – they'd fallen into an exhausted sleep somewhere around dawn, naked, sated, sweaty bodies entwined, as one.

He continued laughing as they pulled his arms upwards behind his back, and it was only when they wrenched them so far up that they dislocated his right shoulder that his laughter morphed inevitably into screaming. He passed out again, and again they revived him with cold water. They untied him briefly, and wrenched his dislocated shoulder back into place - not, he knew, out of any concern for his welfare, but simply so they could start the whole damn process all over again. He noticed that Mr. Magoo wasn't even asking him any questions – he seemed more interested in enjoying Leo's suffering. His lips were curled up slightly and there was a gleam in his eyes behind those glasses that seemed almost sexual in their enjoyment of his pain. Leo felt the darkness open up and swallow him whole. It would be so easy to surrender to it, to go so far into yourself that you never came out again, to go insane from the pain. Leo was tempted; he had been so tired fighting this war, so sickened by it and all that it entailed. He had tried to believe in the ideology behind it, had wanted to be the enthusiastic kid he had once been, who was so clear in his certainties, but that had been a long time ago, and somewhere along the line he'd discovered a cynical core to his soul that he had never realized existed before. Who, seriously, would miss him, if he surrendered to this in this hellhole? If he goaded them into killing him, or gave up and offered himself whole to the insanity that could give him a refuge from this pain? He knew his mom and sisters and Jed would all grieve for him, but they'd get over it, in time....The words of Jed's letter came back to him, refuting that argument, refusing to give him that let out: I miss you. All my love, Jed...Those words repeated, over and over in his head, refusing to be silent. Leo gave another hopeless laugh and daylight flooded back in around him, complete with the terrible agony of what was being done to his body. He couldn't give in. He could never give in as long as he had Jed's letter, nestling in his boot. It wouldn't allow him to give in. It rested against his foot, reminding him of all he stood to lose if he didn't get out of here alive, of the one person he'd hurt most of all if he gave up. Leo shrieked out his pain, aware, all the time, of Mr. Magoo gazing at him from those dark, calculating eyes. He



locked stares with his tormentor; the man in front of him wanted him to submit and buckle under this terrible torture and Leo felt that obstinacy that Jed had so often teased him about coming to the fore. He would \*not\* give in. He might scream, and bleed, and cry in pain, and his body might break in two, but the one thing he would \*not\* do was give this bastard the satisfaction of having defeated him. It was strange, he thought, what torture told a man about his own soul. Somehow he'd found a place inside where he could be strong, but he knew how easily it could have gone the other way; if fate had contrived it that he'd been shot down without Jed's letter in his pocket to anchor him in this sea of pain, he couldn't honestly say whether or not he'd have found the strength to hold on.

He had no idea how long the torture lasted but it felt like a lifetime. The pain all merged into one and between sessions he was thrown back into his cell to lie beside the increasingly comatose Morelli. They gave them water and a meagre amount of food, but in their windowless cell Leo lost track of the days. He had no idea whether it was day or night, or whether he was alive or dead most of the time. Every day was much like the last until the day that Mr. Magoo walked into his cell, accompanied by his usual posse of guards, and waved his hand at Leo where he lay outstretched on the floor on his back. Leo immediately scrunched his hand around Jed's letter which had been lying loosely in his hand where he had been re-reading it for the thousandth time. He didn't want his captor to catch a glimpse of his letter and confiscate it. He wasn't sure he could survive without it.

"Captain McGarry – get up," Mr. Magoo ordered.

"Hey, am I late for my next torture session?" Leo laughed. "I'm so sorry, boys. I was having such a good time that I forgot all about it."

"Lieutenant Morelli, get up!" Mr. Magoo ordered. Leo laughed again.

"He's got a broken leg and, in case you hadn't noticed, it's infected, so he ain't going anywhere," he said. Morelli gave a hazy little groan – he hadn't said anything coherent in a long time and there was a new stench in the cell that Leo knew meant that his leg had turned gangrenous.

"Get up - both of you!" Mr. Magoo ordered. "We're moving you."

"Moving...?" Leo looked up at him in surprise, his pain-fogged mind trying to make sense of this.

"Yes, Captain." Mr. Magoo stood over him. "We're taking you North – where we have the facilities to question you properly." He gave an unpleasant smile. "So get up – you have a long walk ahead of you."

Leo rolled over onto his belly, tucking Jed's letter surreptitiously into his pocket as he did so. "Walk?" He said, becoming immediately serious as he struggled to get to his feet, every muscle in his body protesting the sudden movement. "You can't make Morelli walk anywhere," he pointed out. "The man has a broken leg for god's sake! He needs medical attention not a hike through the fucking jungle."

Morelli's eyelids fluttered open and he looked at Mr. Magoo, and then at Leo. He gave Leo a little grin.

"Mom says hi, Captain," he whispered.

"He's delirious," Leo pointed out. "You can't move him."

"I agree." Mr. Magoo nodded. "He'd hold us up – so there's only one thing to do." He reached for his gun, pointed it at Morelli's head, and pulled the trigger. It all happened so fast that Leo didn't even realize what was going on until it was done, and Morelli's brains and blood were splattered all over the wall, and himself.

"Oh shit...oh Christ..." Leo gazed in total horror at the corpse of the young lieutenant, and then turned back to Mr. Magoo. "You killed him in fucking cold blood," he hissed. "All he needed was a fucking doctor...oh god...you fucking murderer." He took a step forward, and the guards grabbed his arms and held him back.

"Ah, you aren't laughing any more, Captain." Mr. Magoo gave him a truly chilling smile. "Did I finally do something you didn't find funny?"

Leo felt a surge of fury flood through his body and if he could, he would have thrown himself at the man there and then, and wiped that evil smile off his face. "I will kill you," he hissed. "One day. I'll kill you."

Mr. Magoo's smile broadened into a grin, and he gave a little gurgling bark of laughter.

"Ah, now *that* was funny," he said softly, and then he reached out a hand and grasped Leo's bruised and stubbled jaw. "You are nothing, Captain," he hissed. "Just another arrogant American who'll break in the end, like all the other cowardly American pigs. You won't laugh when I break you, Captain," he said, his voice full of loathing, his fingers digging into Leo's jaw, and then he released Leo, turned, and left the room without a backward glance at the corpse he had left behind. Leo offered up a small, silent prayer for Lieutenant Morelli as he was forced along at gunpoint in the murderer's wake. Leo slipped his hand into his pocket, fumbling to be sure Jed's letter was there and hadn't fallen out in his clumsy manoeuvrings back in the cell. He was relieved when his blood-stained fingers closed around it; he couldn't lose the letter - not now - he needed it too much. A man had been shot right in front of him as if he were no more than a dog, and this letter, bloodstained, torn and scrunched up though it was, was the only thing he had to prove to himself that Mr. Magoo was wrong when he told him that he was nothing. He was something to somebody. He just had to keep on believing that.

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## Chapter 5 by Xanthe

Wednesday Early Morning

"Whose blood, Leo?" Jed asked, gazing at his friend intently.

"It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago." Leo stood there, looking gaunt and haggard. The angry light in his eyes had faded to be replaced by those shadows again, and his jaw was clamped shut.

"Whose blood?" Jed asked again. "Not..." He hesitated, unsure that he wanted to hear the answer to the question on his lips. "Not yours?"

"No. Not my blood." Leo picked up his tie and tried to knot it, but his hands were shaking the way they only did when he was under emotional stress. Jed continued gazing at him, noticing everything but not offering to help. Leo gave up with the tie and left it hanging around loose around his neck.

"Leo," Jed pressed.

"Franco Morelli," Leo snapped. "It's his blood." He found his jacket and shouldered himself into it.

"Morelli?" Jed frowned. "He was the kid you got shot down trying to save?"

Leo's entire body was stiff with tension as he looked around for his jacket.

"They gave you the Silver Star for that," Jed murmured softly. "And the Distinguished Flying Cross. I was so proud of you – when I eventually found out, which wasn't until several months later," he chided softly. He remembered meeting Leo at their June 17th anniversary back in 1970, and his friend hadn't said a word to him then about Franco Morelli; he had mentioned being shot down – he hadn't been able to hide the physical evidence of the shrapnel wound on his shoulder apart from anything else – but he hadn't told Jed that he had gotten that wound while trying to rescue a fellow pilot. Jed knew Morelli had died, and he had often felt that Leo blamed himself for that, although he wasn't sure why.

"Yeah," Leo shrugged, as if none of this conversation had any importance to him. "Keep the damn letter, Jed, if you want it," he said and then he stepped away sharply, wrenched open the door, and disappeared out into the hallway without saying another word. Jed would have raced after him except for the fact he was only dressed in his bathrobe while Leo had the advantage of being fully dressed, if dishevelled. He glanced back at the letter with a frown. He didn't care about the letter – he cared about Leo – but somehow he had the feeling that this letter was the key to whatever was bothering Leo. He opened it carefully, taking care not to tear the fragile paper, and began to read.

The letter made him smile in places as he remembered his intense joy at the birth of his first child but he was none the wiser when he'd finished it. What was there about this letter that

had caused Leo to keep it all this time, and why had he dug it out now, and why, particularly, did it seem to be so important to him at the moment? Jed lay on the bed for a long time, the letter loosely clutched in his hand, thinking it through. He remembered their June 17th anniversary in 1970. Leo had acted strangely all evening – Jed sat up straight as he suddenly realized that \*this\* was the memory that had been tantalizing him so much earlier. On that June 17th anniversary Leo had been like a stranger; eager for sex, unwilling to talk – much like he had been last night. He'd had a nightmare, even been violently sick – and eventually he had started to talk – about how he'd lost faith, about being shot down...was there something else? Something he hadn't told Jed at the time? Something that, for some reason, was coming back to haunt him now?

Jed got up, swiftly took a shower and got dressed, and then, tucking the letter carefully into his pocket, he walked down to the West Wing. It was so early that the place was deserted. He found Leo sitting in his office, gazing absently at the folded flag in the glass ceremonial case on the shelf beside him.

"Hey." Jed stepped quietly into the room. "Isn't that the flag that was on Lieutenant Morelli's casket when they buried him at Arlington?" He asked softly.

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "Well, they didn't bury him – just an empty casket - but..." He trailed off absently.

"His folks gave you the flag?" Jed asked – he knew this story but he wanted Leo to talk about it all the same.

"Yeah. I went to see them. Spent some time with them. Went to his funeral...his mom took a liking to me. I have no idea why. Boy, that woman made the best gnocchi I've ever tasted." His lips twisted into a gentle smile of memory, which slowly faded. "She died a few years back – his dad died years before her – and...she wrote to me a month or so before she died and sent me the flag – she knew she was dying and she said she wanted me to have it because she knew I'd take good care of it when she was gone." He gazed at the flag absently. "He was just a kid, Jed."

"So were you," Jed pointed out quietly.

"No – sometimes I think I was born old. He was a \*kid\*. Full of piss and vinegar. You know, sometimes...sometimes it's hard to know what to do...what the right thing is," he mused softly.

"About what?" Jed asked, holding his breath. Leo thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head.

"Nothing. I was just...it was a long time ago, Jed."

"Yeah, but he was important to you – important enough for you to get shot down trying to save his life. You never told me much about that – hell, I don't think you'd have told me at all if it wasn't for that shrapnel wound on your shoulder."

Leo shrugged, and fingered his shoulder absently.

"Were you worried that he suffered?" Jed asked. "He ejected, right? And you found his body when you bailed out? That's how you knew he was dead?"

Leo gazed at him blankly.

"Leo?" Jed pressed gently.

"What? Oh. Yeah." Leo nodded. "Yeah, he bailed out."

"Do you think he was already half dead when he ejected, or was there a problem with his chute, or the landing itself?" Jed asked, unwilling to let this drop, sure that it was important in some way.

"He...he was in a pretty bad way when he hit the ground," Leo replied.

"Leo...was he alive when you found him?" Jed asked. "Is that what's been preying on your mind? Did you..." A terrible thought came into his mind. "Did you have to shoot him, Leo? Was he so badly hurt that you had to do that to put him out of his pain, and to prevent him being found by the VC?"

"What?" Leo looked up, a shocked expression in his eyes, and Jed wondered if maybe he'd gotten it all wrong but he didn't know what else could account for the way Leo was behaving so he pressed on.

"Leo, did you kill Lieutenant Morelli?" He asked.

Leo shook his head. "No, Jed," he replied firmly. "Although sometimes I think I as good as killed him," he murmured.

"Leo..."

"Jed, I'm sorry about earlier. I've just been feeling sick the past day or so and that's made me bad tempered – well, more bad tempered than usual anyway." He grinned at Jed, as if defying him to make the joke before he did. "I have a pile of work to get through and I'd like to get on with it, if you don't mind, Mr. President," he said formally, signalling that, as far as he was concerned, this conversation was at an end. Jed gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. He felt he'd been close, but when Leo's shields went up he knew from experience that it was virtually impossible to penetrate them; he'd never known a more obstinate person in his entire life.

"Okay," Jed said softly. "But if you want to talk, Leo, I'm right next door."

"Sure. Fine." Leo smiled at him absently.

"Here." Jed stepped over to where Leo was sitting, and took hold of his tie. "You can't sit here all day with this undone," he commented, tying it into a knot with practiced ease. "Margaret would think there was something wrong if you did," he said, in a tight kind of voice.

"Margaret worries too much," Leo said, drawing away from Jed's hands as he finished with the tie.

"She's not the only one," Jed said meaningfully. Leo refused to rise to that particular bait and instead glanced at his work with a distracted frown. Jed stood there for a moment, hoping for something more, but when it became clear that more was not going to be forthcoming he finally turned and went back to his own office. He hadn't given up though – something was clearly going on with Leo right now, and he wasn't going to rest until he had found out what exactly it was.

Leo remained on a short fuse for the rest of the day, which was unusual for the usually even tempered, unflappable chief of staff. He did have a tendency towards irascibility but it was always leavened by his sense of humour, which was never far beneath the surface. Now, it was buried deep, and he seemed distracted. He did his work as efficiently as ever, but Jed noticed that he often seemed absent minded – something that the Leo he had known for 40 years had never been; Leo had always been sharp, someone who knew exactly what was going on, but now his attention seemed to be elsewhere. His behaviour towards Jed was particularly baffling; he seemed to want to spend time with the President, making excuses to enter his office, even to just put his head around the door and say "hey", but invariably didn't seem to have much else to say beyond that. Jed was becoming worn out with the situation by the end of the day, and decided that if it went on for much longer he'd take Leo into a room at the Residence, lock the door, and not let him out again until he had found out what the hell was going on.

By the following day, Jed found that the strain of presiding over an increasingly jittery West Wing was beginning to take its toll. He hadn't realized before just how much Leo was at the centre of the smooth operation of the place. Leo had a gift, a knack, for getting the best out of people; everyone wanted to do their best for Leo, starting at the very top with the President himself, as Jed knew all too well. Jed had always been aware that whenever he did anything, from taking his college exams to winning a Nobel prize, he wanted Leo to be proud of him – and, he had to admit, he'd been a little jealous on first assuming the Presidency to find that he wasn't alone in that. There was something about Leo's personality; his loyalty, his dedication, and his way of managing his staff, that made *\*everyone\** want him to be proud of them. Some members of staff clearly felt it more than others, with Josh the front runner in the 'wanting to impress Leo' stakes, and that had helped make the West Wing such an efficient, orderly and generally pretty happy place to work. It shocked Jed how quickly that veneer of happiness and efficiency fell apart without Leo's expert hand guiding them all along. He hadn't realized how absolutely central Leo's personality was to the smooth running of the West Wing. Now, with Leo snapping at everyone except the President himself, the place had become severely unsettled in less than 2 days. Josh was trying desperately to over-compensate by working all hours and being

perfect, and was so wound up by the effort that he'd started taking it out on Donna, who, in turn, had taken to gossiping with Margaret in the hallways to relieve the tension. Toby had barricaded himself in his office, Will had been found talking to himself on more than one occasion, and CJ and Charlie seemed to be constantly bickering with each other. Jed felt as if everyone's nerves had been stretched to breaking point and if something didn't happen soon to clear the air and return things to normal, then he suspected he'd be the one to snap first. He had enough on his plate with his presidential duties, which Leo had always made much easier for him by his constant and supportive presence. Now, he had to deal not only with his own workload without Leo's usual active but unobtrusive help, but also with a slowly imploding West Wing, and Jed knew his own temper well enough to worry that at some point he'd just blow a fuse and the whole place would go up in smoke. He didn't want that to happen as he was pretty sure there would be innocent casualties in the fall out, but something had to give – and soon.

Matters weren't helped by the logjam of appointments that built up during Friday, a news story that CJ was having trouble squashing, and a political upset on the hill that required Josh to disappear every five minutes and Leo to take increasingly frantic phone calls from him – something that didn't do anybody's nerves any good in their current state.

Jed felt he was close to exploding by the time he saw the Vietnamese ambassador again late on Friday afternoon – having kept the man waiting for an hour after his scheduled appointment time. Usually Leo was an unflappable presence by his side, ready and willing to soothe his irritations with a light hearted comment or some calming advice, but at the moment Leo was like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs so Jed had nowhere to go with his bad mood and no Leo to gently cajole him out of it; instead his Chief of Staff seemed sunk in a mood of distracted annoyance. Jed asked him a question about the forthcoming meeting three times before Leo even seemed to hear it, by which time it was too late as Ambassador Thuan was being shown through the door. Jed shook the man's hand and frowned at Leo, who remained seated on the couch, and made no move to greet the Ambassador. Jed was not, by this point, very surprised; Leo's distraction had reached the stage where the only thing he could say for certain was that Leo hadn't - thus far - snapped at \*him\*, his best friend, lover and President, but anyone else seemed to be fair game, as the West Wing staff had found to their cost over the past few days.

Thuan seemed not to notice Leo's lack of manners – he sat down on the couch, while Jed took his own seat in the armchair facing him.

"I'm sorry I had to cut our meeting short a few days ago, Ambassador," he began. "Perhaps we should start again where we left off?"

"Certainly, sir." The Ambassador bowed his head politely.

"Or perhaps we should cut to the chase," Leo said, leaning forward. "Which is – what do you want from us?"

"Want from you?" Thuan glanced from Leo to Jed, a puzzled frown creasing his features.

"Yeah. What do you want from us in return for your help in dealing with increased narcotic cargoes being shipped into the US from Vietnam in consignments of innocent everyday goods, like sneakers, and baby clothes?"

"It's a problem that has become much worse in recent years." Thuan nodded. His hands were crossed in his lap, and he looked perfectly relaxed – but Jed sensed that same sharpness from the man that he'd noticed on their first meeting.

"Mainly because the Vietnamese government hasn't shown much interest in dealing with the problem," Leo snapped.

"We have very severe penalties for drug trafficking," Thuan responded, with a raised eyebrow.

"Penalties that aren't much use if you don't actually arrest anyone," Leo pointed out. Jed frowned; this hadn't been in his briefing notes and he sensed the tension in the room rising at an exponential rate.

"Let's take a step back here," Jed said, interjecting smoothly. Thuan leaned back in his seat and gave Leo a coolly assessing stare. Leo returned it, his blue eyes blazing in a way that was entirely uncharacteristic. He remained leaning forward in his seat, his stance combative. "Ambassador, we're not denying that this is a huge problem for us," Jed continued. "Not only from a drug interdiction standpoint but also from a homeland security consideration – if these people can smuggle in heroin, there's no telling what else they might be able to smuggle in, and we can't search every single container."

"Of course not, sir." Thuan shook his head. "And perhaps, as Mr. McGarry is pointing fingers, I should remind him that the flow of heroin to the US shot up immediately after the US normalized relations with Vietnam after the war." He gave a small, tight smile. "Several US companies set up operations in Vietnam virtually the very next day. The problem started then. I believe the US companies were attracted by the cheap labour in our country – there were no inconvenient little matters such as child labour laws, or workman's compensation, or safety regulations after all." He gave another taut smile. "So, for the US..." He shot Leo a vicious glare, "to question our commitment in dealing with this issue, seems...disingenuous bearing in mind the greed of your own companies and how that has contributed to the problem."

Jed took a deep breath, and nodded; the ambassador clearly wasn't pulling any punches but then neither had Leo, and he could respect that on both sides.

"It isn't our job to make the labour laws in your country, - that's the responsibility of the Vietnamese government," Leo snapped. "So, I'll ask you again - what do you want?" Leo had a grim, confrontational look on his face.

"Mr. McGarry?" Thuan remained as coolly self-possessed as ever, but Leo was starting to look like a dog with a bone – an extremely angry dog.



"There's nothing for you to gain by tackling heroin smuggling. It isn't your kids it's killing – it's ours. So what do you want from us in exchange for you to start acting like a responsible government and crack down on the people growing and exporting this stuff?" Leo got to his feet.

"Leo!" Jed interrupted, seriously alarmed both by where this was going and Leo's increasingly hostile tone.

"No...sir," Thuan raised his hand. "Mr McGarry's point is perfectly valid. Obviously, we do require monetary assistance from the US government, but that is simply to give us the resources to do exactly what Mr. McGarry is asking. I must, however, refute his point that we do not care. I can assure you that the Vietnamese government cares very deeply about the growth in this trade, and the people it kills and the lives it ruins – whatever their nationality."

"Yeah. Right." Leo snorted. Jed turned to gaze at him, astonished. "Are you seriously telling me that you give a damn about the life of one single American kid being lost or ruined, Ambassador? Life's cheap – it's expendable, and an American life means less to you than..."

"Leo!" Jed cut in, seriously shocked. He got to his feet, put a hand on Leo's shoulder, and swung him firmly in the direction of the next door office. "Excuse me, Ambassador," he said, as he propelled Leo out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind them. "What the hell was that about?" Jed hissed, the moment they were alone. "Did you have a diplomacy bypass? Christ, what's wrong with you, Leo? Whatever it is, get a grip, and fast - or I'm going to call in Stanley."

"Stanley? Oh for god's sake!" Leo exploded. "The man will start to wonder whether every single person in the West Wing is nuttier than a fruitcake. First Josh, then you, now me – is there anyone in the White House who won't have needed his professional services by the time this Administration is over?"

"Think about it," Jed said firmly, standing his ground. "Because I've had enough of this. You either talk to Stanley or you talk to me, but one way or another you deal with whatever the hell is going on in your head right now because we aren't going to continue like this."

Leo glared at him; he was pale but his blue eyes were burning furiously, and his entire body looked so tense that Jed knew that if anyone so much as nudged him right now, he'd go off like a firework.

"Leo – does this have anything to do with the fact that this guy's Vietnamese?" He asked. Leo's eyes flashed.

"For Christ sake!" he snapped. "Thuan isn't the first Vietnamese ambassador I've talked to. He isn't even the first Vietnamese person I've seen since I came home from Vietnam 3 whole goddamn decades ago." His voice was dripping with sarcasm. "I have Vietnamese friends, I enjoy Vietnamese food, it's ridiculous to even suggest..."

"Then what is it? Is it the drug issue that's bothering you?" Jed interrupted.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Leo flung back.

"Yes, but I'm not behaving as if I'm losing my mind!" Jed snapped. He paused, and took a deep breath, and then decided on a direct approach. "Leo – tell me what's wrong," he said.

"Nothing's wrong," Leo replied automatically, the shutters coming down as Jed had both feared and suspected they would.

"Oh goddamn it, Leo, stop being such an obstinate idiot for one moment in your life!" Jed hissed. "I \*know\* you remember. I know something's wrong. Damn it, I don't have time to go into this right now – I need to get back to the ambassador. Just think about what I said about seeing Stanley because I'm not dropping this, Leo. This is \*not\* going to go away." And he turned on his heel and returned to his meeting with Thuan.

Jed managed to smooth over the situation with the ambassador; the man was smart and perceptive, and used Leo's outburst to his advantage but Jed couldn't blame him for that. Jed gave the man as much time as he could spare as a matter of courtesy after the way Leo had spoken to him, and that meant that he was even further behind by the time Thuan left. He had wanted to have a private word with Leo, to see whether his friend had had time to reconsider and was now prepared to finally tell him what was bothering him, but when he opened the door he found the entire senior staff standing outside, waiting for their meeting with him which was scheduled next, and he realized that his conversation with Leo would have to wait.

The staff all filed into the Oval Office and Jed bit back a sigh of exasperation as Leo joined them without so much as a glance in his direction. He was feeling increasingly bad tempered and hot under the collar, and he hoped this meeting wouldn't drag on too long or he was pretty sure that someone would bear the brunt of his bad mood and feel the sting of his tongue.

"Let's keep this short," he said in a peremptory tone, glancing at them over the top of his glasses. "I have something that demands my urgent attention." He gave Leo a meaningful look but his friend just gave him a hard stare in return. Jed glared at him, and Josh shifted anxiously, picking up on the tension between them. He wasn't alone; CJ cleared her throat, sounding equally anxious, and Toby was gazing at them watchfully, those dark eyes of his missing nothing.

"Sir..." CJ began.

"Yes. CJ." Jed gestured to her. "How did the press briefing go?"

CJ made a face. "Not very well, sir."

Jed sighed, trying his best to keep his lid on his temper. This wasn't CJ's fault. "Okay. Not the news I wanted to hear right now. All right, go ahead. Tell me where we're at. Is it hot in here or is just me?" He undid his shirt sleeves and rolled them up to his elbows, utterly exasperated by just about everything in his life at this moment in time.

"Well, I did my best to deflect them, but they did have several very pertinent questions, sir." CJ glanced at her notes, and then back up again. "Not least Katie and Danny, who both wanted to know...my god, sir, what happened to your arm?" She broke off, pointing at Jed's wrist. Jed glanced down and saw the violent purple bruise there, a legacy of his wrestling match with Leo a couple of nights previously. He could have kicked himself for rolling up his sleeves – he had noticed the bruise but barely paid it any attention, and now he felt an old sensation of shame that he could trace all the way back to his childhood, when he'd tried to hide the evidence of the many bruises he'd sustained at his father's hands.

"It's nothing...I just caught it in the shower door," he muttered, which was the most convincing thing he could come up with on the spur of the moment, but he felt another wave of shame as the ease with which he told the lie reminded him of how he'd covered up those childhood beatings with similar excuses. He glanced hurriedly at Leo to find his friend's eyes transfixed in shock on the bruise. Leo's gaze travelled up Jed's arm and into his eyes, and Jed knew that Leo was remembering those bruises his father had given him too – and how Jed had tried to hide them.

"It looks nasty – you should put something on it," CJ was saying, but Jed took no notice because at that moment Leo got to his feet, muttered an excuse, and then left the room. Jed was torn between going after him and staying to finish the meeting, but decided, regretfully, on the latter course of action. He still had a job to do, and his last meeting with Leo hadn't gone so well. He was in no mood to confront a Leo who was not only struggling with some pretty powerful demons right now, but who was also guilt stricken about hurting him.

"Sir...?" CJ asked. "Have you been feeling okay recently? I mean...I wasn't sure if..."

Jed dragged himself back to the meeting and realised, with some annoyance, that she had completely misinterpreted his admittedly lame explanation about the shower door.

"I'm fine, CJ, and no, I haven't been having any MS episodes. I was just clumsy that's all," he retorted, more angrily than he'd intended. "Now, can we \*please\* move on?" He said impatiently, casting one last glance in the direction in which Leo had disappeared. He was aware, out of the corner of his eye, of Toby watching him, and that did nothing to improve his temper. He felt very self conscious about the fact that Toby knew about his relationship with Leo – the last thing he wanted was for Toby to conclude that neither of them were able to do their jobs because their personal lives were getting in the way.

The meeting lasted for one long interminable hour, and by the time it was over Jed was about ready to resign as President and go and live on a desert island. He was very much

aware that even though the meeting was over, his showdown with Leo was not – and the knowledge that he had that to look forward to didn't exactly put a spring in his step. He walked wearily over to the interconnecting doors between their offices and opened them, only to find that Leo wasn't at his desk.

"Margaret – where's Leo?" Jed glanced into the outer office where Leo's secretary was sitting. She glanced up at him, a scared look in her big eyes.

"Sir, I don't know." She shook her head. "He came out of the Oval Office about an hour ago and just took off – I asked him where he was going but he ignored me. I reminded him that he has a meeting at 7 but he didn't seem to hear me – and now I don't know what to do."

"Cancel the meeting," Jed said grimly.

"But, sir, it's with..."

"I said, cancel it," Jed told her. "Leo won't be back this evening."

"How do you know that, sir?" Margaret asked looking puzzled.

"Because he's either taken off god knows where, or he's going to be spending the evening talking to me," Jed said grimly. "Either way, he won't be attending any damn meeting."

"What do you mean...taken off?" Margaret asked nervously. "Where would he go?"

Jed swallowed down what was left of his temper, as another, more worrying thought came into his head and he realised that with Leo in his current state of mind, he couldn't predict what the hell his Chief of Staff would do or where he would go. "I don't know," he murmured, shaking his head. "I really don't know."

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## Chapter 6 by Xanthe

1970

They walked them along a branch of the Ho Chi Minh trail for 2 days. At first, Leo was glad just to get out into the sunlight, to know when it was day and night, and, at the back of his mind, he did think that maybe there would be at least some possibility of escape. He was also pleased to see other Americans – there were three young soldiers being marched with him, all of them, he noted, in as bad a physical condition as he was, so he guessed that the physical torture he'd endured was pretty commonplace. His initial euphoria about being outside was soon dashed though; all the prisoners had their arms bound tightly behind their backs, which made marching difficult, and his sore shoulder, combined with the pain and discomfort in his entire body from the repeated beatings, made every single step agonizing.

There was no energy to expend on thinking about how to escape – it took all his focus to just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and there was no question of asking for a rest or for the pace to be slowed – Morelli's murder had shown him exactly what he could expect if he did that.

Mr. Magoo rode ahead of them in a jeep, while a handful of VC soldiers escorted their tiny huddle of pitiful prisoners.

"Any idea where they're taking us?" Leo whispered to his nearest companion, a marine who couldn't have been more than 19 years old. The marine shook his head, his eyes dull with pain and hopelessness. His breathing was coming in fast gasps and Leo thought, from the way he was holding himself, that he probably had at least a couple of broken ribs. There was nothing he could do for the man though – he'd tried to interfere with Morelli and there was a corpse rotting in a cell a few miles away as testament to what a bad idea that had been. Leo felt another wave of cold fury sweep through him at the memory of how Morelli had been killed. He thought of the Lieutenant's mother, and wondered what the hell he'd tell her about her son's death, if he ever got out of this nightmare alive. No mother wanted to hear that her son had died afraid, sick and tortured, thousands of miles from his home, and that his body had been left behind, unburied, an irrelevance to those who had taken his life so casually.

"What's your name?" Leo asked the marine beside him, because it was crucial to get the names of those taken so they couldn't be 'disappeared' later, but before the kid could reply, one of the VC yelled at them to stop talking, and a second later Leo felt the butt of the man's gun on his jaw, knocking him to the ground. He lay there, blearily, for a second, the world swimming around him, and then the repeated kicks the VC soldier was landing on his body encouraged him to struggle to his feet again. The jeep ahead of them stopped, and Leo sensed Mr. Magoo's eyes on him, gazing at him with a vicious, searching coldness. He shivered, despite the heat, and, putting his head down, started walking again. He didn't want to draw Mr. Magoo's attention to him, or give him any opportunity to dispense the same kind of jungle justice to him that he'd bestowed on Morelli.

They walked for several long, interminable hours. Leo was so tired and he hurt so much that he lost track of the time. He even carried on walking when one of his fellow prisoners ahead of him keeled over and fell by the side of the road. It took him several seconds to realize what had happened, and only the repeated shouts of the VC's finally brought him, and the rest of the small convoy, to a halt.

Leo turned around and gazed, hazily, at the man who had fallen. He was young – they were all so young - younger than him by about 5 years at least. He felt like an old man among these kids who should by rights have been at school. There was much shouting, and the fallen soldier was kicked viciously, but he didn't move and it was quite clear to Leo that the kid was unconscious and all the kicks in the world weren't going to change that. Finally Mr. Magoo got out of his jeep, walked back to where they were clustered, and shouted something at his guards. He crouched down beside the soldier and pulled back his eyelids, then stood up, and rapped out an order. The VC soldier pointed his rifle at the soldier's head and pumped several bullets into him, and there was nothing Leo could do but stand by and

watch. He gazed at Mr. Magoo with cold hatred as the man walked past him to return to his jeep. The interrogator seemed to sense Leo's eyes upon him because he paused, and glanced back. His gaze met Leo's and the two of them stared at each other for a long time. Leo knew that if he had a gun in his hands he'd kill the man there and then, but as it was, there was nothing he could do but stare him out. They stared at each other for a long time, each weighing up the measure of the other, and then Mr. Magoo gave another of those chilling smiles, and returned to his jeep.

The march continued. Leo's arms hurt so much that he wondered if, like the young soldier, he'd pass out too, and get deliverance from this nightmare in the same way, courtesy of several bullets to the brain. At one point he was so tired, and in so much pain, that he even fantasized about it; there were worse ways of dying after all – and at least the soldier hadn't been aware of his own death. It would be so easy just to fall over, to give in, and accept the sweet deliverance of oblivion. He had hidden Jed's letter in his boot, and it rustled slightly with every step, reminding him of how Jed would feel if he didn't come back alive, and, as always, he knew he could never go easily to his death, no matter what happened to him out here. All the same, he was at the limit of his physical endurance. The marine beside him was in just as bad a condition, maybe worse, and his rasping breathing was a constant noise, a counterpoint to the sweat that trickled down Leo's face, half blinding him as he was unable to wipe it out of his eyes, and the terrible aching pain in his shoulders, and jaw.

His footsteps were becoming so leaden that it was hard to stay upright, and, suddenly, he lost his footing and rolled into the bushes. He was so dazed that it took him a few seconds to realize what had happened, and by then pandemonium had broken out; one of his captors shouted at the convoy to stop, and the point of a gun was thrust into his chest. He couldn't get up easily with his arms tied behind him, and, as he scrambled to right himself, he was suddenly aware of a shadow blocking out the sun. He looked up into Mr. Magoo's magnified eyes, reflected through the thick-lenses of the glasses he wore.

"Did you want to die, Captain?" Mr. Magoo asked, crouching down beside him. "Is that it? Did you see what happened to your compatriot and wish to join him?"

Leo said nothing, just gazed, mutely, at the gun pointed at his chest.

"Well, I'm sorry, Captain, but I have other plans for you." Mr. Magoo smiled that cold, hard smile again, and his eyes glittered behind his glasses. He reached out suddenly, took a fistful of Leo's hair in his hand, pulled Leo forward, and spoke straight into his ear. "First I'm going to break you apart, piece by piece, and then we're going to get the maximum amount of use out of your confession. You'll be famous, Captain. We'll parade you everywhere – on TV, in the papers. Everyone back home will know your name - and that you're a traitor." His lips were so close to Leo's ear that Leo could feel his warm breath tickling his skin, and it raised goosebumps on his flesh. "Nothing to say, Captain? You don't even have a laugh for me?" Mr. Magoo asked. "Where has your sense of humour gone?"

Leo jerked back his head, away from the man's grasp, and managed a wry, twisted smile.

"You got me beat," he admitted. "There's no way my sense of humour's as good as yours."

Mr Magoo frowned, looking puzzled. "A confession?" Leo raised an eyebrow. "Now that's good – that's funny. You won't get a fucking confession from me, you murdering son of a bitch – I'll die first," he spat. "And I'll do it just to spite you. You are so full of shit. I'm not some big fucking prize – I'm not rich, and I don't come from an important family - I'm nothing special so who the hell cares about a confession from me? Nobody except you for some fucking twisted reason of your own. So, you're taking me to Laos, or someplace where they have bigger, shinier meat hooks to help you torture a fucking confession out of me so that you can parade me for propaganda? If you think that's gonna happen you must have a damn good sense of humour, pal."

Mr. Magoo's eyes flashed behind his glasses, and he rocked back on his heels and gazed at Leo thoughtfully.

"It's my experience that people are less brave when I have them at my mercy in my interrogation room. I look forward to our next meeting, Captain, when we'll put these arrogant words of yours to the test."

He gave Leo one last, hard stare, and then got up and returned to his jeep without a backward glance. Leo was prodded by a rifle butt and got slowly to his feet, and then resumed his place in the convoy. He wanted to think about anything other than the threat of what lay ahead of him, so he tried instead to remember Jed's letter by heart. He wished he could fish it out of his boot, and read the familiar, elegant scrawl. He could hear his friend's voice through the words, as if Jed was speaking them to him; they were all he had of home on him right now, and he longed to be back there, lying in Jed's arms, talking long into the night the way they always did whenever they were alone together.

Leo, there are other things I wish I could say, as always, but you know that. When I see you again (June 17th???) I'll lock you in a room and say it all - I think you know the kind of stuff I mean and you're probably pretty damn grateful that you're miles away so you don't have to endure the full, unedited, Jed Bartlet spiel.

Leo wished he could tell Jed right now that he'd happily listen to him day and night for weeks on end if he could just see him and be with him again. He thought, wearily, about that June 17th anniversary. If he didn't escape, if he was still here on June 17th, or worse...he didn't like to think of Jed sitting alone in some hotel room somewhere, wondering if he'd show, hoping, despite everything, that he'd somehow get there...because right now, after Mr Magoo's threatening conversation, he doubted that would ever happen; and even if somehow he managed to get free, and could make that anniversary, Leo found himself wondering whether he'd even go. Jed was going to make a success of his life – anyone could see that – and Leo didn't want to drag him down. Jed had Abbey, and a baby, and a life of respectability. His friendship with Leo put them both on the outside, and for what? For the sake of sex or love or whatever connection it was that they both found so hard to sever? Leo was certain of one thing – Jed could gain nothing from his relationship with Leo and lose everything. So maybe it was for the best if he died out here, if he didn't show up to that June 17th anniversary, and Jed had a chance to get on with his life without him.

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Friday Evening

A knock at the door of his private study in the Residence brought Jed immediately to his feet, and he was halfway to the door by the time Ron Butterfield had opened it, and stepped inside.

"Did you find him?" Jed asked anxiously, closing the door behind his secret service chief.

Ron shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. We tried his hotel room, his ex-wife's house, his daughter's apartment – he wasn't at any of them. We even checked out his favourite restaurants."

Jed sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. He had called Jordan, and all of Leo's closest friends, but none of them had seen him either. It was close to midnight, and there had been no sign of Leo and no communication from him since he'd left the meeting earlier that afternoon. Jed had tried his cellphone and pager, leaving messages on both, but there had been no reply.

"Sir..." Ron hesitated. "Is there something that leads you to believe that Mr. McGarry's in any particular danger?" He asked carefully. "I mean...he's only been gone a few hours, and...maybe he just wanted some time alone? You said that he left of his own free will – there's no concern that he's been abducted is there?"

"No...god no." Jed shook his head. Ron had gone through all this before, when he'd first sent him out looking for Leo, and Jed got the distinct impression that Ron thought Leo was big enough to take care of himself and come back in his own time. He was also concerned that Ron might think they'd had some kind of a quarrel, and Jed was misusing his Presidential authority by ordering the secret service to go looking for him if that was the case. He didn't know if Ron *was* actually thinking that, because it was impossible to know what Ron Butterfield was thinking at any given point in the day, but Jed was uncomfortable about the fact that Ron knew about his relationship with Leo, and he was projecting that discomfort onto his security chief. "It's just..." Jed hesitated. "You know Leo, Ron. He doesn't do unpredictable things; he sure as hell doesn't run off in the middle of a meeting and not return. The man's as reliable as the day is long. Besides...he'd never leave without telling us where he was going." Without telling *me*, he thought to himself. "Leo's been behaving very strangely these past few days and I'm really concerned, Ron."

"I've noticed that Mr. McGarry seems to have been very stressed," Ron said quietly. Jed glanced at him sharply, then sighed, and shook his head.

"Yeah, I should have known you'd have noticed, Ron. Nothing passes you by," he said, in what he hoped didn't sound too much like a tone of complaint. Damn, but he wished Abbey was here right now. She'd know what to do – she might even be able to guess where Leo had gone. Jed admired her for all the work she did, and allowing her to have her own agenda as First Lady had been one of the conditions of him running for the presidency in the



first place, but she sure as hell did seem to go out of town a lot. He knew that she thought he had Leo, and didn't need her as much as when they'd been living in New Hampshire and Leo had been miles away in Washington DC, but he loved her too; he loved and needed them both, damnit, and neither of them was here right now.

"Sir, do you have any reason to suspect that this was more than work stress?" Ron probed gently. "Mr. McGarry hasn't been receiving any mail that he was concerned about has he? I'm thinking of death threats maybe?"

"Oh come on, Ron, you know Leo – he'd have told us if he'd had a death threat," Jed said, although he couldn't help worrying about the possibility all the same. Leo did have a tendency not to want to concern him about anything – he could imagine Leo taking that philosophy too far and neglecting to mention a death threat – but he was fairly sure Leo would have told Ron, even if he'd tried to keep it from Jed.

"Was anything troubling him in his..." Ron hesitated, "personal life?" he finished tactfully. Jed bit down a wave of embarrassed anger – he hated being questioned about his private life, and it was even worse when that questioning entailed talking about his relationship with Leo. They'd always been so private, so discreet, and it upset him to think that others might judge their relationship without fully understanding it. There was no question of Ron doing that, but Jed felt uncomfortable all the same. Still, he had no choice but to put those feelings aside if he wanted to find Leo.

"He was having nightmares," Jed said, flushing slightly because he was sure Ron would know how he knew that.

"And was that unusual or different from normal? Was it triggered by something?" Ron asked.

"He's had nightmares for as long as I've known him," Jed murmured. "He saw his father's body after he committed suicide...then, after Nam..." He shrugged. "They got much worse," he said tightly, hating that he was having to talk about something so personal, feeling that he was betraying Leo's confidence in some way. "But he'd never talk to me or anyone else about them. These last few years they've been pretty rare though – in fact I can't remember any until recently."

"Any idea why they came back? Or what they might have been about?" Ron asked. Jed turned and paced over towards the fireplace.

"He was screaming about being hurt. He thought someone was hurting him," he recalled. "It was the day after we saw the Vietnamese ambassador...he was pretty sick that day...he said it was food poisoning...and then there was the letter."

"What letter?" Ron frowned.

"An old letter I sent to him when he was in Vietnam." Jed went over to his desk, and pulled the letter out from among the papers there. "There are blood stains on it...he said they

belonged to this kid he tried to rescue when he was shot down...and then I found him in his office, just gazing at the flag that was...oh shit." Jed looked up sharply. "Get the car, Ron. I think I know where he is." He strode to the door, opened it, and half walked, half ran down the hallway, Ron following hard on his heels.

It was raining as they got into the car; Jed waved aside the offer of an umbrella, and sat back in his seat, hoping, grimly, that he was right, but worried, if he was, about what this said about Leo's current state of mind.

It was the journey of only a few minutes for the presidential car and escort to glide along the rain slicked National Mall. It was late, and the rain was so torrential that few people were out; the water was coming down so hard that it bounced off the street.

"Sir, you stay here, I'll..." Ron began as the car drew up by the Lincoln memorial, but Jed took no notice of him. He got out of the car and ran along a grassy bank, then paused, as the familiar black granite stone of the Vietnam wall loomed into view.

There was nobody there.

Jed looked around the dark, rain-streaked landscape, sure that he wasn't wrong, feeling in his bones that Leo was nearby – and his gaze alighted on a lone figure sitting on a bench, seemingly oblivious to the torrential downpour soaking him. Jed exhaled a relieved sigh, and jogged over to the bench. He got there, panting hard, and looked down on Leo's rain soaked face; his friend's hair was plastered to his head, reminding Jed of another storm several years previously, when he'd rescued his friend from a motel parking lot, and they'd argued about Leo's drinking.

"You shouldn't run – you're not very fit," Leo commented, as Jed sat down beside him, gasping for breath.

"I'm fit! And \*you\* should answer your damn phone, especially when it's the President of the United States calling you," Jed grumbled, relieved beyond belief that Leo sounded halfway normal. "Must be the only person on the entire planet who refuses to take a call from me," he muttered.

"I needed some time to think a few things through," Leo said musingly, as if to himself. "I'm still pretty surprised about that. Mostly I think the problem has been that I underestimated how big this is. Should have realized that and not tried to carry on as usual...although, I think there's something to be said for carrying on as usual – most of the time anyhow. It's always worked for me before."

"You're gonna tell me what the hell all this is about, aren't you," Jed said. "I mean, before we both drown out here, or the press get wind of this and descend on us."

"Hmm. Well, I've been thinking about it and I don't..."

"Leo!" Jed protested. "It wasn't a request. I was \*telling\* you that you're gonna talk to me

about this, not damn well asking you!"

"Make the man Commander in Chief of the biggest armed force in the world and he gets so bossy," Leo commented.

"I've always been bossy," Jed replied, but he knew that the banter was just a veneer, to hide how serious this was. Leo looked like a drowned rat, sitting on the bench soaked to the skin, the water flowing down his face in little rivulets, his shoulders hunched against the rain. "Have you been here all this time?" Jed asked.

"I think maybe I have," Leo replied. "Although I'm not sure I remember too well."

"And will you come home now?" Jed asked gently. "With me? I'll draw you a bath and we can have some food, and talk."

"The talking part won't be easy," Leo warned.

"I didn't think for a moment that it would," Jed said softly. "Leo? Yes?" He stood up, and held out a hand to his friend. Leo gazed at it for a moment, and then put his hand in Jed's and allowed his friend to help him to his feet, and escort him back to the waiting car.

They didn't speak on the journey back to the Residence. Leo simply stared out of the window, and Jed gazed watchfully at his friend. He hurried Leo inside once they arrived, escorted him up to the guest bedroom they'd shared the other night, shut the door pointedly on Ron and his secret service escort, and pushed the dripping wet Leo into a chair. Jed then strode into the bathroom and began running a bath for his friend, grabbed a couple of towels on his way out, and returned to the bedroom.

"Here." He slung a towel at Leo. "Get undressed," he ordered peremptorily. Leo opened his mouth as if to protest at the order, but then closed it again when he saw the expression on Jed's face, and mutely began to do as ordered. Jed stood by with the other towel, and the moment Leo was naked, he wrapped it around his friend's shoulders, pulled him close, and kissed him firmly on the lips. Leo blinked, clearly surprised.

"I thought you were mad at me," he muttered when Jed drew back.

"I am. Livid," Jed replied, starting to rub the towel over his friend's cold, wet body.

"There's no point drying me if I'm going to have a bath," Leo pointed out sensibly.

"I'm drying you out of a misplaced need to take care of you right now," Jed replied. "And seeing as how that's impossible in any practical sense because you won't talk to me, or give me any idea what's wrong or how I can help you, I'm reduced to sublimating my caring instinct into drying you instead."

"Hmm, you've been spending far too much time with Stanley," Leo commented.

"And maybe you should see him too?" Jed said softly. "Shall I call him?"

"No." Leo shook his head. "It's okay." He raised a hand as Jed started to protest. "I will see him if you think I should, but not now. First...I need to tell you some stuff. Stuff I never told you before."

"Vietnam?" Jed asked.

"Yeah."

"Morelli didn't die when his plane went down, did he?" Jed asked.

"No." Leo shook his head. "Jed – I'm sorry. I didn't ever want to tell you any of this, but..." He paused, and his fingers snaked down Jed's arm and fastened gently around his bruised wrist. "I'm sorry I hurt you," he murmured. "I had no idea I'd done that until CJ pointed it out earlier. That's what made me realize I need to do something because...I really don't seem to be coping very well right now."

"We'd noticed," Jed said, in a heartfelt tone. "But this is nothing." He gestured to his bruised wrist, where Leo's finger marks were clearly visible, painted purple and blue on his skin. "You didn't do it on purpose for god's sake!"

"And you have a habit of covering for the people who give you bruises," Leo reminded him.

"This is nothing like..." Jed began.

"You told CJ that lie about the shower door like a seasoned pro!" Leo snapped. "You shouldn't have to lie to cover up for \*me\*! It shames me." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, and I need you to know that I'm sorry – and you deserve an explanation although I don't think you'll thank me for it – and I'm even sorrier about that. I really am, Jed. I'm sorry for what I'm going to tell you, and for not telling you before." He grimaced, and Jed felt a shiver of foreboding creep up his spine.

"Go take a bath," he whispered, tracing his hand gently down the side of Leo's face. "I'll phone for some food and I'll be waiting out here. Take your time, Leo...and Leo..." He called his friend back as Leo started to walk in the direction of the bathroom. "Whatever you have to say, it won't change anything," he promised. "It doesn't matter – it was a long time ago." He wasn't sure if he was right in his suspicions about how Morelli had died, but he thought he might be close to the truth. If Leo had put his wounded friend out of his misery in the heat of the battlefield then Jed sure as hell wasn't going to judge him for it.

"No, Jed. It kind of does matter," Leo replied. "I thought it didn't too – because you're right, it was a long time ago, and I'd put it all behind me until a few days ago...but I've had a choice to make, and now I've made it – I just need to figure out how to live with it."

And so saying, he disappeared into the bathroom. Jed gazed after him, totally perplexed. This was sounding more worrying by the second, and he couldn't even begin to guess what was going on. He called for some food, took off his own wet clothes, dried himself, and then got dressed in pyjamas and a bathrobe. The food arrived and Jed put a couple of plates on the coffee table. Leo emerged a few minutes later, similarly attired in the pyjamas and bathrobe that he kept at the Residence, looking warmer but no less haunted and haggard than he had earlier. He sat down on the chair facing Jed with a sigh.

"You must be starving." Jed gestured with his hand at the food but Leo shook his head.

"I couldn't eat anything right now. Maybe later," he said.

"Okay." Jed sat back in his chair, and waited. He watched, curious, as Leo spent several minutes in silent contemplation, and then, finally, took a deep breath and started speaking.

"Jed, do you remember our June 17th 1970 anniversary?" He asked.

Jed frowned. "I'd hardly be able to forget that one," he replied. "You showed up late, you hardly said a word, and you made love to me as if I were some stranger you'd picked up in a bar. Then you had a nightmare and were sick all over the floor."

Leo made a face. "Yeah. It did go something like that," he sighed.

"And then," Jed continued, "you finally opened up to me. You told me all about your disillusion with the war and what you were doing in Vietnam...and you said you'd been shot down, but I only found out about that when I saw that shrapnel scar on your shoulder."

"Yeah." Leo nodded.

"And we connected that night, after you started talking," Jed reminded him. "We talked all night and I think I was able to help you a bit – wasn't I?"

"Jed, you have no idea how much you helped," Leo sighed. "I wasn't even sure I'd show up to that anniversary – it was only the thought of you, sitting there alone, worrying about me - and getting mad about me not showing up - that made me finally drag my feet along to that hotel."

"Why, Leo?" Jed asked, leaning forward. "Why didn't you want to come?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't have changed, and I felt I had, so profoundly and I didn't want to burden you with that...and because something had happened to me that I didn't want to talk about, or to tell you about, and I was afraid I would," Leo told him.

"And you did!" Jed said. "You did tell me and it was fine. It helped – you just said it helped. You told me about how you were feeling, how you'd lost faith and..."

"Jed, after I was shot down I was captured by the VC," Leo interrupted him.

"What?" Jed stopped, in mid-sentence, his brain unable to process what Leo had just said.  
"What, Leo?"

"Jed, I was captured by the VC," Leo repeated. "I spent two weeks in their custody."

"No...you were shot down, you told me that...you have that shrapnel scar on your shoulder..." Jed trailed off, trying to understand what Leo was saying to him. "You were shot down, and then you got picked up by a helicopter," he said, shaking his head. This was what Leo had told him. This was what he'd always believed, damnit! "That's what you said!" He muttered stupidly. "There was a rescue chopper..."

"Yes, there was." Leo nodded. "But not immediately – not for two weeks," Leo said softly.

"I would have known...your mom would have told me!" Jed struggled to refute what he was being told.

"She didn't want to believe it – and she didn't want to tell you because she knew you had a new baby and she didn't want to worry you until she had some more definite news – which was the right thing to do as it turned out because I was only missing for two weeks," Leo told him. "I didn't lie to you, Jed. I just didn't tell you about those two weeks."

"That's a sin of omission, Leo, as you well know," Jed replied, gazing at his friend, unable to keep the worry out of his expression. "Two weeks?" Leo nodded. "Leo, what did they do to you during those two weeks?" Jed asked quietly.

Leo shrugged. "Pretty much what you might expect," he replied.

There was a long pause, and then Jed finally said it. "They tortured you?" He felt his hands clenching into fists as Leo gave him a quiet nod in reply. It didn't matter how long ago it had been; this was Leo. Calm, quiet, witty, good humoured Leo. His Leo, the man he'd been in love with since he was 17 years old, and for the majority of their relationship this man he was so close to had been carrying around this big secret and had never told him. Jed couldn't even begin to imagine what those two weeks must have been like for his friend, but a dozen horrible images came into his mind. He remembered Leo back in 1970, with his buzz cut hair, looking so fit and handsome in his pilot's uniform, and yet...and yet...even back during that 1970 anniversary he'd sensed there was something different about Leo. He'd seen those shadows in his friend's eyes and had \*known\* there was something different about him, but who could have guessed that this had happened? Jed didn't want to think of that Leo, \*this\* Leo, being hurt, screaming with pain, thousands of miles away from the people who loved him. Damnit, he wished he'd been there, wished he'd known, wished he could have done anything to have stopped it happening, to have made it not so...

"What are you thinking?" Leo asked, an anxious expression on his face.

"That I have all this power, god damnit, that I have all this..." Jed waved his hand around the room, "And that it's no damn use because I can't do anything about what happened to

you...because it all happened so long ago, and you...you didn't even tell me!" He growled at Leo, feeling irrationally angry, and having nobody to lash out at except the person sitting opposite him. "Why the hell didn't you tell me, Leo?" He raged.

"Why didn't you tell me you had MS?" Leo countered. Jed felt his jaw drop open, and he snapped it shut again, angrily.

"That's different!" He yelled. "Christ, that's different! You know it is! You were in recovery, and I didn't...hell, I didn't want \*anyone\* to know. I wouldn't have told Abbey if she hadn't diagnosed me herself – that's half the problem of living with a damn doctor."

"Why didn't you want her to know? Why didn't you want me to know?" Leo pressed.

"Because I didn't want you treating me any differently! Because I didn't...I didn't want it to be true," Jed sighed. Leo nodded, and shrugged. "It's different!" Jed insisted.

"No, it isn't. You didn't want to upset me because I'd only just gone into rehab and you didn't want to give me an excuse to start drinking again. I didn't want to tell you because you'd just had a baby for god's sake! You had a good life, Jed, and I didn't want to drag you down with my problems...and after a point it becomes too late to mention it – oh, by the way, I was tortured a couple of years ago – when is it ever the right time to drop a bombshell like that? You know how hard that is - you could have told me about your MS at any point but you didn't. Abbey had to in the end."

"It's different," Jed repeated obstinately. "Christ, this is a major thing that happened to you, Leo. I could have helped you! I could have been there for you."

"Yeah. Ditto," Leo said, making a face. "Let's just accept that we don't like being weak with each other, Jed. Partly because we honestly don't like hurting each other, and partly just 'cause we're men." He gave a wry grin. "We don't like to admit there's anything we can't handle...and the truth is...the truth is that I \*did\* handle it, Jed. I handled it just fine."

"By becoming an alcoholic and drug addict? Was that how you handled it, Leo? Because you didn't drink anything like as much before Vietnam as you did after."

"I drink because I'm an alcoholic, Jed, just like my father and my grandfather. Vietnam didn't help but it didn't cause anything. I was a heavy drinker before I went." Leo shrugged. "I accept that it might have had something to do with the valium – I started taking pills because my back ached from when I bailed out, but I don't think I needed any excuse to become an alcoholic, Jed."

"Okay." Jed took a deep breath, and sat back in his chair, trying to calm himself. "Okay. I guess I'm just throwing around these accusations because I don't want to think about what happened to you out there, Leo."

Both men gazed at each other in silence for a long time, then Jed got up, walked over to the fireplace, and rested both his hands on the wall, thinking. This wasn't about him and any

sense of betrayal he felt at Leo not having told him this before; Leo was right – the MS issue wasn't so very different and he understood why Leo hadn't said anything. It \*hurt\*, damnit, but it would have hurt anyway, and he knew he was concentrating on this hurt because the idea of thinking about what had happened to Leo during those two weeks was far more painful.

Finally, Jed turned around and faced his friend again.

"Tell me what happened," he said softly. "As much or as little of it as you want – but stop trying to protect me, Leo."

"Okay." Leo nodded. "But I think I have to tell you everything if we're going to make sense of this past week, and if I'm going to have a hope in hell of making you understand why I've come to the decision I have."

"Okay." Jed sat down in his chair again. Some instinct made him want to go over to Leo and hold him tight, to offer him the comfort he hadn't been able to give him 30 years ago...but that was the problem. This might be news to him but Leo had lived with it for decades, and fairly successfully too. Jed had never thought of his friend and lover as being a particularly damaged individual; he had his demons, sure, but they all had those, and Leo had such bucket-loads of common sense that it was hard to imagine that there was any part of his past that he wasn't reconciled with, or that could still cause him distress. On the other hand...Leo's behaviour these past few days did seem to indicate that even if he'd learned to live with what had happened to him, it still had the ability to upset him on some level, and if that was something Jed could help with, then he'd try his damndest to do so.

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## Chapter 7 by Xanthe

1970

They arrived at another camp just before nightfall the following day. This place was clearly a holding camp – it was ramshackle, makeshift, and much more run down than the previous place had been. The Americans were all shepherded into individual cells, and Leo felt a pang of regret at being separated from the others. Not that it mattered, but even Morelli's delirious presence had been a focus, something to keep him from becoming too preoccupied by his own pain and suffering. He was thrown into a cell that was smaller and dirtier than the one at the previous camp, but he was beyond caring about his comfort by that point. He had a raging thirst, and fantasized about someone pouring cool, clear water over him. He could imagine craning his head and allowing the sparkling droplets to land on his tongue, slaking the dryness in his mouth, and trickle down his throat, cooling and restoring him. Leo lay where they had thrown him, huddled up with pain and exhaustion, trying hard not to think about Mr Magoo's threat to take him apart piece by piece until he got the confession he was looking for. He wasn't sure he would be able to hold out



indefinitely, but equally, he didn't know what kind of person he'd be if he didn't. He couldn't imagine being anything other than what he was, and he wondered if even the most extreme pain would be able to drive away his lucidity of mind and clearness of thought, making him a blank slate upon which Mr. Magoo would be able to write any propaganda he chose. Leo found no answers, and suspected that only in the heat of torture would he find the truth about his own soul. In the meantime, there was nothing to be done but lie here, and distract himself by thinking of Jed's letter. If he concentrated hard, he could see Jed, his hair flopping into his eyes, bathing his newborn daughter. Leo was pretty sure that Jed would be a hands-on kind of father. He couldn't imagine Abbey allowing her husband to get away with not changing diapers, even if he'd wanted to. Leo smiled softly, and his outstretched fingers flicked aimlessly as he hummed, tunelessly, to himself, in that dark, inhospitable cell, a long way from home.

They came for him just before dawn, kicked him until he stood up, and then dragged him along to a room much like the one in the last camp; perhaps the implements of torture in this room had been more hastily thrown together, but in essence it was the same. Mr. Magoo was seated in a chair at the far end, like a corrupt, vicious king, surveying his hapless subjects from the lofty heights of his throne. Leo fell on the floor in front of him, and waited.

"Captain...it's going to be a long, hard journey to Laos," Mr. Magoo told him. "Maybe by the time we get you there, you'll be ready to co-operate."

Leo opened his mouth to reply, but his throat was so dry he couldn't form any words.

"Ah – are you thirsty, Captain?" Mr. Magoo asked, with what sounded like a smug smile in his voice. Leo glanced up, unable to keep the desperation out of his eyes. He wanted a drink so much that it hurt. "I see you are. Well, we can do something about that, Captain. We have water here...plenty of it." Mr. Magoo gave another one of those hard, cold smiles, and gestured with his head. Leo's arms were grasped, and he was dragged bodily over to a tin bath in the corner of the room. He didn't even have time to think, because next thing he knew he was plunged headfirst into the cold water. He was so glad to be able to quench his thirst that at first he scarcely cared that they were holding his head under the water. Then panic set in, and he struggled against his captors. It took three men to hold him down, something he noted with some satisfaction in a strange, detached part of his brain. It was as if a part of him wasn't experiencing the pain and degradation of what was happening to him, as if some part of him was just watching it all, uncaring and emotionless. Then he heard the blood pound in his ears and he was back in his body and gasping for breath as they pulled his head out again.

"Do you have anything to say to me, Captain?" Mr. Magoo asked.

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "I've heard death by drowning is one of the nicer ways to go – so by all means be my fucking guest, and hold me under there for as long as you like."

Mr. Magoo shook his head, his cold eyes gleaming. "I have no intention of killing you, Captain," he said.

"No. I'm sure you know your trade very well, evil though it is," Leo spat. Mr. Magoo's eyes narrowed dangerously; he nodded again, and Leo's head was thrust back into the water again.

There was a strange silence underwater. Leo became disoriented by the lack of oxygen, followed by the pain in his lungs as he gasped for air when they let him up again, and then the quickfire questions which he found increasingly hard to follow as the torture continued, leaving him more and more confused. Mr. Magoo's voice took on an eerie, dissonant quality and he had long since stopped concentrating on what he was being asked. He didn't think it mattered what answers he gave anyway – Mr. Magoo was enjoying himself so much that Leo doubted he'd stop even if Leo offered to make a full confession and give a full and detailed report on every single plane in the American Air Force and their battle plans.

At some point he thought he might stop breathing altogether, and just allow the water to flood his lungs and drown him. He was so tired that he couldn't think straight any more. Just when he'd made up his mind to do that, it stopped, and he was dumped on the floor. Someone stripped back his flight suit, leaving him half naked, and he lay there, shivering, as the frequent dunkings in freezing water, combined with his injuries and poor physical condition, sent him into state of shock. He saw a pair of black boots stop in front of him, and then Mr. Magoo picked up something that had fallen onto the floor when they had stripped back his flight suit.

"Who is this?" Mr. Magoo asked, holding up the photograph of Jed and Elizabeth.

"Just a friend and his daughter." Leo shrugged.

"You will never see them again," Mr. Magoo predicted confidently.

"Yeah. Okay." Leo shrugged, feigning indifference.

Mr. Magoo reached into his own pocket, and took out a cigarette lighter. He crouched down so that he was level with Leo, held up the photograph, and then, slowly and deliberately, set fire to the corner. It went up in flames, crumpling in front of him, and Leo knew it was absurd but it was as if he had been kicked repeatedly in the stomach. He told himself it was just a photograph, but it made no difference; the loss of the picture hurt.

"What is more," Mr. Magoo continued, "They won't wish to see you, Captain. By the time I'm finished with you, they'll view you as a traitor, and they won't care whether you're dead or alive."

Leo closed his eyes to shut out the view of that burning picture. He tried to imagine Jed, hearing that Leo had broken down, confessed, and told the enemy all he knew. Would his friend turn away from him and never want to see him again? Would he hell! Mr. Magoo didn't know the first thing about Jed, or just how deep Leo's friendship with him went. Leo had a moment of sudden revelatory clarity. He had been struggling throughout this nightmare, and a good few many months before, with his own sense of having been left behind, while Jed moved forward in his life, but, while clinging to Jed's letter in order to get

through this horrific experience, Leo suddenly found everything slotting easily into place. He suddenly knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his relationship with Jed was beyond one or the other of them being left behind, or forgotten, or forsaken - what they had and what they were was beyond such outside measurements or judgments, and finding that restored his drive, and his determination to live rather than to succumb. What his torturer was suggesting was so absurd – the idea that Jed would no longer want to know him, or care whether he lived or died - that Leo laughed again, spit foaming his lips as he did so, and Mr. Magoo's mouth hardened into a tight line. He stood up, glaring angrily, and Leo's laugh died on his lips. He started to shiver even more violently.

"You're cold," Mr. Magoo commented. "We can take care of that."

"The way you took care of me being thirsty?" Leo asked, in a croaky voice. Mr. Magoo gave a grim little nod, and Leo gave a hoarse bellow of pain as his arms were fastened to a meathook above his head, wrenching his dislocated shoulder, and then he felt a familiar thud and a sharp pain as his old friend, the fanbelt, was whipped hard against his cold, wet flesh. He couldn't ignore the pain, although he tried, because it was so pervasive and all consuming, but even as he hung there, his body rapidly turning even more colourful shades of black, purple and blue as they beat him, he offered up a prayer of thanks to whoever might be listening that he had thought to hide Jed's letter in his boot. He could cope with losing the photograph, but the letter was his lifeline; it had become his focus, and was the only thing that was keeping him sane. He honestly wasn't sure what would happen to him if he lost it. Whenever he lost faith, and hope, it was always there, a constant source of comfort and reassurance. Through it, he could hear Jed's voice across the miles that separated them, so that sometimes, in his pain filled delirium, he could even believe that Jed was actually here, talking to him, holding him up through this nightmare, and keeping him strong, always and forever by his side.

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## Friday Night

Jed listened, his hands clenching pointlessly into fists over and over again, as Leo slowly, haltingly, told his story. This wasn't the Leo he'd known for so many years. It wasn't his urbane, permanently unfazed Chief of Staff speaking. This Leo paused frequently, searching for the right words to express his memories. Jed suspected that Leo had been right; neither of them liked showing weakness to the other, and, more than that, neither of them liked the idea of bringing the other down with their own problems. Leo had spent the past several years protecting Jed in so many ways; his natural instinct was always to protect those he loved, and now he was doing something that Jed knew to be against that instinct. So Jed just listened. He didn't interrupt, and made no move to help Leo when he struggled to find the right way of telling his story. Instead he just sat, nodding occasionally for encouragement, and let Leo tell it his way. A part of his mind was falling into freefall as he tried to assimilate all this new knowledge, while another part of him, the intellectual side of his personality, evaluated Leo's story, and tried hard not to think about the reality of what those two weeks must have been like for his friend. Leo came to a faltering finish in what felt to Jed as if was the middle of the story, and not the end, as if he had just run out of words. Silence fell

between them, a silence that stretched on for ten, fifteen minutes, and then, finally, when he was sure that Leo had run out of steam, Jed spoke.

"How long were you at the second camp?" He asked softly, wondering if he could tease the rest of this harrowing story out of his friend.

"Just that one night. The next day they moved us on again – and the day after that the trail was bombed - there was pandemonium and half the VC escorting us and both the other prisoners were killed...so I took my chance and ran." Leo shrugged.

"With your arms tied behind your back?"

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "I kept waiting to hear the shots to ring out, to feel a bullet in my back...but it didn't happen. I made it into the jungle and kept walking from there. Managed to cut my arms free, and by an enormous stroke of luck came across a marine patrol a few days later. They called in a rescue chopper...and that's how I got out of there."

"How long were you in the hospital?"

"Not long. A couple of weeks."

"You never said. You never wrote. You never..."

"No," Leo said shortly. "They wanted to use my escape as some kind of PR stunt but I refused. I just got better, got my ass out of there, and then went on one hell of a bender. In fact, I don't think I was sober again for the rest of my tour of duty." He shrugged.

"I knew something had happened. You were just so different when I saw you in June that year." Jed shook his head. "The way you talked and walked, the way you looked, the way you avoided looking me in the eye – the way you made love."

"I slept with any man or woman who showed the slightest interest between my rescue and that June 17th anniversary," Leo told him brutally. "I'd wake up some mornings and wonder who the hell these people were, but before then, for just a few minutes before I opened my eyes, I could imagine that warm body next to me was yours. It was worth it just for those moments."

Jed shook his head, speechless for perhaps the first time in his life. He knew Leo loved him, and that their relationship was uniquely special, but Leo so rarely talked about his feelings that sometimes they shocked him. He hated the thought of Leo, fresh from his ordeal, trapped with his memories, unable to reach out to Jed, to talk to him about what happened to him, to write or call him. Even if he couldn't have alleviated much of Leo's suffering, Jed wished he could have had the chance to try.

They were quiet for a long time. Leo sat, huddled in his bathrobe on the couch opposite him, gazing fixedly at his hands as if he was still unable to meet Jed's eyes. Jed just gazed at Leo, wondering what the hell they said or did next after a revelation of this magnitude. He

wondered what Leo wanted him to do; he wanted so much to make things better, but worried about making them worse instead, and then he stopped worrying and decided to just follow his instincts. He got up, stepped across the room, sat down on the couch beside Leo, and put his arms around his friend. Leo came, surprisingly unresisting. Jed kissed his friend's hair, and held him tight, because it might have happened 30 years ago but it had still \*happened\*, and Leo was still hurting, even if he wouldn't admit it. Jed held his lover fiercely, protectively, wanting to give him all the comfort, love and reassurance that he would have bestowed on that Leo of thirty years ago, if only he'd known. If only he'd known how close he'd come to losing Leo. If only he'd known how far away from him Leo's experiences had really taken him...if only he'd known then there was nothing, Jed realized, that he could have done for Leo. Leo had dealt with it in the only way he knew how, the way their generation \*did\* deal with things, and maybe it wasn't such a bad way after all. He'd pushed it down, got on with his life, and had been successful and happy for a good many years until...

"Leo," Jed whispered softly.

"Yeah. You gonna let me go now? My arm's hurting," Leo commented.

"No," Jed said, although he eased up on the tight hug a fraction. "I'm not going to let you go, Leo. I have a feeling that I'm never going to let you go again," Jed told him sternly.

"Well that's gonna make your next press conference interesting, if nothing else," Leo observed.

"Leo, you're not done are you?" Jed asked gently.

"No." Leo glanced up sharply and looked straight into Jed's eyes, and Jed braced himself for worse to come.

"Why has this come up now?" Jed asked, and Leo exhaled a little sigh, as if that wasn't necessarily what he had been expecting Jed to say. Then he took a deep breath, and drew back a little – as far as Jed's embrace would allow him to go - squaring his shoulders. "Leo?" Jed pressed. "I mean, you've had nightmares for as long as I've known you, but after all this time, after 30 years, suddenly you're screaming in your sleep, and throwing up regularly. What's going on?"

"Something I could never have expected." Leo gave a wry smile. "Something I could never have prepared myself for. If I'd just had some warning, maybe I could have got found a better way of dealing with it, but it was a bolt out of the blue, and my physical response took me completely by surprise. I felt like a total schmuck throwing up into the trash in my office."

"Leo, tell me," Jed prompted. "What happened to bring it all back to you so vividly?"

"I saw him again. Met him. Shook his hand. He was standing there...in your office...after all these years. Real, human, alive and \*there\* after being just a face and voice in my

nightmares for so many years. I didn't know what to do...I couldn't tell you because you didn't even know...and there was nowhere to go with all these feelings that came up and blasted me off my feet." Leo shook his head but Jed was fixed to the spot, paralyzed with shock.

"Leo, what are you saying?" He hissed. "Ambassador Thuan...?"

"Yeah." Leo shrugged. "Ambassador Thuan...Tran Duc Thuan...it feels strange having a name for him after all these years. I don't think he'll ever be anything but Mr. Magoo in my head though."

"Leo, it was thirty years ago!" Jed remonstrated. "You can't possibly be sure after all this time..."

"Oh, I'm sure," Leo interrupted him in a hard, low tone. "I'm completely sure, Jed. You get to know a man when he's torturing the living hell out of you – and you forget, I've seen him in my nightmares for years so I can recall every single thing about him. It's him. It's definitely him." He nodded firmly.

"Thuan doesn't even wear glasses," Jed pointed out. "That was your defining feature of..."

"Ever heard of contact lenses? Or laser surgery?" Leo flashed back, interrupting him. "Jed, you don't understand...it was instantaneous. I \*knew\* in a way that went beyond just recognizing the shape of his face, or the expression in his eyes, or his height, or whatever. I just...knew." Leo said fiercely. Jed gazed at his friend for a long time, taking in the haunted, angry light in Leo's eyes and slowly, reluctantly, tried to accept what Leo was telling him.

"If that's the truth...if the Ambassador..." he began slowly.

"Yeah. I've been through all this, Jed. I'm one step ahead of you," Leo told him.

"Then we have to decide what to do," Jed continued.

"Nothing," Leo said flatly. Jed released his hold on Leo for the first time, and drew back in surprise.

"What?"

"Jed, there's nothing we can do," Leo told him. "Nothing. Zero. Zilch. That's the decision I was talking about. It's the only decision I could come to."

"Leo!" Jed got up and began pacing angrily around the room. Leo watched him, impassively. "He tortured you and he killed Lieutenant Morelli in cold blood against all the conventions of war. He's a murderer, Leo. You can't tell me you're happy to just sit back and do nothing!"

"Happy? No." Leo shook his head. "But it's exactly what we have to do, Jed."

"And what – are you seriously telling me that you can have meetings with this man? That you can shake his hand and..."

"No. I can't shake his hand again. I did it once, the first time I met him in the Oval Office, while I was still in shock, and I wanted to scrub it raw afterwards. I won't do it again."

"But you can sit in meetings? You can talk about his country's needs and problems, calmly, without losing it..." Jed shook his head. "You're seriously telling me you can do that, Leo?"

"Yes I can. I have to," Leo told him.

"Well, you sure as hell may be able to but I can't!" Jed snapped.

"Yes you can. And you will," Leo said in a hard tone. Jed stopped pacing and gazed at his friend in astonishment.

"Leo..."

"You have no choice, Jed. You're the President of the United States and he is the Vietnamese Ambassador. There is nothing you can do to change that."

"The man should be brought to justice!" Jed yelled. "He should be tried..."

"For crimes committed during a war 30 years ago?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"We're still conducting war crimes trials for atrocities that took place in World War 2!" Jed flung back. "So why not? Why the hell not, Leo?"

"Because of you, Jed. And because of me too," Leo said, and for the first time since this conversation had begun, his voice broke a little. "Because I'll be the only witness. It'll be my word against his – how likely, seriously, are we to get a conviction on those grounds? Like you said, it was 30 years ago – I'll be asked how I can possibly be sure of my identification. It doesn't matter that I \*am\* sure – you'll take my word for that, but I doubt a court will be convinced. And then, do we really want your name dragged into this – because it will be, just by virtue of what I am to you."

"I don't give a damn about that!" Jed protested.

"Well I do," Leo said stubbornly.

"Leo, leaving aside what he did to you, he killed Morelli!" Jed pointed out. "He should pay for that."

"I know." Leo's tone was hoarse, and despairing. "Jed, I'll have to give evidence. I'll have to tell this story I told you here today, to a courtroom full of people, and you know how hard it was for me to sit here and tell it to my closest friend. I'll be questioned on it, and it'll be all over the papers. It'll overshadow any news cycle, any political story we try to put out, any

policy initiatives we work on. It'll take over our lives...and I honestly don't think I could bear that."

"Leo!" Jed snapped, in an exasperated tone.

"Jed! Don't you understand? He damn near ruined my life once, and I don't want it to happen again!" Leo's blue eyes were flashing like lightning.

"I don't think it's that," Jed murmured softly. "I think you're still trying to protect me."

"Maybe I am," Leo sighed. "Jed, I've done nothing else but think about Morelli since I met Thuan in your office. He's been constantly on my mind. You see, I could forgive what Thuan did to me, but I could never, ever forgive him for snuffing out that poor kid's life as if he was nothing."

"Then..." Jed began.

"Jed. I'm the one who has to live with this decision, not you. I don't think I'll get justice for Franco Morelli. I don't think this case will get anywhere, not when you consider who I am and who Thuan is. It'll just take over my life, and your life, and for what?"

"For justice," Jed said softly.

"Morelli's been dead for thirty years. What justice is there in that?" Leo replied, placing his head in his hands and rubbing his forehead wearily. "And there's another problem with trying Thuan for war crimes too, Jed. I committed war crimes." Jed's head jerked up and he gazed at Leo, shocked. "I did – not knowingly but I did. One of my bombing runs resulted in the deaths of civilians – and the same was true for plenty of other Americans too. Who's to say that what we did was any worse than what Thuan did? Who is going to make that case to the relatives of those civilians that died as a result of my actions? Not me." Leo shook his head.

Jed gazed at his friend, trying to understand where Leo was coming from, and he felt a wave of pity for Leo for having to make this impossible decision. He wasn't surprised that Leo's first instincts were to protect him, the Presidency, and both their lives from the inevitable media intrusion that would accompany a trial of this magnitude. The thought of Leo going through all this on the stand, giving evidence, saying what had happened to him – he thought it might break someone as private as Leo in two.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," he murmured, sitting down beside Leo again, and placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too." Leo glanced steadily at his hands, refusing to meet Jed's eye.

"Leo?" Jed squeezed his friend's shoulder softly, alarmed by the stiffness in Leo's demeanour. "It's okay. I understand. Just give it some time – we'll figure out what we have to do. I'll get Debbie to delay Thuan – if need be Josh can see him – you need some space



from all this. I still think you need to see Stanley, but for the next few days I want you to rest. We can talk about this. We can think about what to do – this has been a shock – you need some time to consider the whole issue. You might change your mind about trying to get justice for this guy, about bringing a case against him...

"Jed," Leo interrupted him in mid-flow. "I didn't tell you everything."

Jed felt as if a very large, very cold fist was closing around his heart, squeezing tight. He knew Leo was about to hit him with something he really didn't want to hear. Leo was still gazing at his hands, still avoiding Jed's gaze, and somewhere, at the back of his mind, Jed had a premonition of what was to come, and his mind fled wildly from the thought. He might not want to hear this, and he knew that Leo *\*really\** didn't want to tell him, but somehow they both knew it had to happen anyway.

"Jed, something else happened to me," Leo said softly.

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"So, Captain..." Mr. Magoo's eyes, magnified behind their thick lenses, loomed into view in front of him. "Have you changed your mind yet?"

Leo shook his head, and felt sweat fly from his face into his hair, and splatter his arms. "Nah," he replied, with as much insouciance as he could. He might be down, but he wasn't out yet, and he wasn't going to let this bastard think he was even close to winning. He hurt in too many different places to count; Mr. Magoo had kept his promise to warm him up – his skin felt as if it was on fire, and every single stroke of the hard rubber on his skin made him yell with pain. There was something intrinsically evil about the fact that the rubber didn't split his skin – there was no blood, just long, solid, purple bruises that hurt so much that Leo knew there was no way he'd be able to lie down and get comfortable when they slung him back in his cell again.

"You think that this is the worst we can do to you?" Mr. Magoo asked softly, his voice hissing in Leo's ear. "It isn't, Captain. There is much worse to come. You might as well give in now – because you will give in eventually."

"Yeah." Leo managed to summon another grin from the depths of his soul. "See, I don't think so. I don't think there's anything you can do to me that'll make me do what you want. I'm kind of stubborn y'see – that guy in the photograph, he's always telling me that being stubborn's my worst fault, and he's right. Once I dig my heels in..." Leo shook his head regretfully. "So, I think you're going to have to kill me...and I'm fine with that – really." He gave another grin. Mr. Magoo's eyes narrowed menacingly.

"Ah, do you think this is all just a game, Captain? Is that it? Do you think there is nothing I can do to you that will puncture that monumental American arrogance, Captain? If so – you're wrong. Very wrong." Mr. Magoo's nostrils flared almost excitably and his eyes fixed

Leo with an assessing stare. "There are things I could do, Captain, that I think might change your mind – that I think even you might not be able to smile at, or laugh about." Leo felt a shiver travel up his spine; he was looking pure evil in the face, and he was trapped here, entirely at its mercy. Mr. Magoo seemed pleased by his reaction, and he turned and yelled something in his own language to the guards in the room. Leo watched, alarmed, as they muttered to themselves, and then left the room. The big man, the one who had been beating him with the fanbelt, was the last to go. On Mr. Magoo's orders, he cut Leo down and Leo fell immediately to the floor, his arm muscles useless after having been tied above his head for so long. Mr. Magoo smiled at Leo, clearly pleased to have worried his captive, and then he crossed over to the door, shut it firmly behind the big man, picked up a chair, and placed it in front of the door.

"I don't want us to be disturbed," he said, returning to where Leo lay on the floor. Leo blinked up at him, wondering what the hell was going on and whether he had enough strength in his tortured, battered body to launch an attack on his torturer, now that the man was alone, and unguarded, but he knew he couldn't even stand, let alone move fast enough to strike, so he stayed where he was, on the floor, panting to himself. Mr. Magoo crouched down in front of him, his eyes glittering darkly behind his glasses.

"You're a mess, Captain," he said.

"Yeah." Leo surveyed his reflection in Mr. Magoo's glasses, saw a thin, haunted, haggard face, bruised and cut in places, with the beginnings of a straggly beard, and barely recognized himself.

"A disgrace to your uniform," Mr. Magoo continued.

"Yeah. Whatever you say." Leo shrugged.

"It must be hard for you – being here, experiencing this discomfort. You're a pilot – you haven't had to fight in the heat in the jungle. You haven't had to see the people you kill, or hear their screams," his torturer hissed. "You just drop your bombs and leave. You're a coward, Captain McGarry."

"Okay, but I'm not the one who ties people up and beats 'em for a living," Leo pointed out. "So I think you're on weak ground there." He gave another wry grin as he wearily surveyed his tormentor.

"Nothing dents that arrogance does it?" Mr. Magoo hissed dangerously. "That American pride and arrogance that sends you here to dare tell us what we should do and how we should think. How we live is none of your business, Captain. You shouldn't be here."

"Trust me, right now I wish I wasn't," Leo replied, but there was something about his torturer that was scaring him – the other man had an almost demonic look in his eyes, and Leo had the feeling that Mr. Magoo wasn't seeing him as a man at all. Instead, he was a symbol of all that he hated, of all that he wanted to crush, subdue and have victory over.

"I will wipe that smile off your face, Captain," Mr. Magoo promised, and then he reached out, grabbed a fistful of Leo's hair, and dragged him bodily over to the table a few feet away. Leo tried to will his feeble muscles into some semblance of resistance but he had nothing left. He had been through too much, and although he flailed wildly with his arms, and struggled as best he could, he failed to free himself from the other man's grasp. Leo felt himself being pushed over the table, his bruised flesh protesting as he was flung against the hard grain of the wood. "You need to understand who is in charge here, Captain, and I think I know a good way of showing you," his captor told him. Leo suddenly had an inkling of what was about to happen to him, and he gave a shout of protest, and renewed his struggles in earnest. He fought with all his might, and almost managed to slip out of the other man's grasp, when a hard blow to the side of his head from the butt of a gun stunned him into silence. He heard a ringing in his ears, and the world burst into a spangle of white stars and then turned black and when he came to, just a few seconds later, he could feel cold hands stripping away the rest of his flight suit. He moaned, his fingers scrabbling pointlessly around the hard edge of the table, searching desperately for something to hang on to, and then he felt his buttocks being wrenched apart. He closed his eyes, facing, finally, that this was going to happen and he couldn't stop it. All he could do was find a way to live through it...he tried to concentrate on something, anything else but the sensations in his body as he felt a violent intrusion that wrung a scream from his lips. At least, he told himself, he wasn't a stranger to the act itself, even if this rape was as far from his lovemaking with Jed as it was possible to be. He wondered how many other young men his torturer had done this to – men who hadn't had the experiences with another man that he had, young kids who would have been destroyed by such an act being visited upon them. He bit down hard on his lip, trying hard to block out the sounds of the other man's harsh, excited breathing as he thrust into him. It hurt, just as everything hurt right now, but it wasn't going to destroy him. He wouldn't let this destroy him. He had to think of something...anything to distract him from the grotesque act being forced on him...and his mind went to the letter in his boot. He knew it off by heart...if he concentrated, he could recite it in his mind, from beginning to end. It was something to think about...how did it start...? Dear Leo...Your god-daughter weighed in at 7lbs 4ozs on the morning of December 30th...He blinked hard, trying to focus on the letter and not what was happening to him. His god-daughter – and she was a good size too. Neither Jed nor Abbey were very tall, so he wondered whether some recessive genes would kick in and make her shoot up or whether she'd be as diminutive as her parents. Jed's father had been a pretty tall man, now he thought about it...

"So, Captain...do you understand who is in charge \*now\*?" his captor sneered behind him. It wasn't a question that seemed to need an answer, so Leo ignored it.

What came next? He wasn't sure...it was hard to keep concentrating on it.... I can't wait for you to see her. I'm enclosing a photo of me holding her so you can see how perfect she is. Damn, he knew he'd missed a bit out but he couldn't remember...it was hard to remember exactly...and he didn't want to think about the photo because something had happened to it. He let out a choked sob as he remembered the photo going up in flames, and the sound seemed to spur his captor on. He felt a hand on his waist, fingers digging into his flesh, keeping him still, keeping him in place, and another hand on his neck, keeping his face pressed into that hard wooden surface. He tried to wrench his mind away again, but he'd lost his place in the letter...he should try to think of another bit... Damn – I just re-read this

letter and it's almost illegible. I hope you can read it – my hair got so long that I keep pushing it out of my eyes...Leo almost managed a smile, despite himself. Now that was something he could concentrate on. He liked Jed's hair when it was longer, liked stroking his friend softly, aimlessly...liked the way Jed liked it too, even though he protested and complained for all he was worth. Jed was such a cat, he liked being stroked and petted...if Leo concentrated very hard he could feel Jed in his arms...they'd just finished making love and Jed was lying there, his head on Leo's chest, and Leo was stroking his hair...this was a good memory. Thank god for the letter, for Jed's words, written weeks ago, giving him something to cling onto now, when he needed it most. The actions behind him seemed to reach a frenzy and he fought against a rising tide of nausea as he smelt sweat, and the scent of raw, violent sex in the air. Mr. Magoo gave a bellow of triumphant release and then it was over. His captor released his grip on Leo's neck and waist, and, unable to stand up, Leo fell to the ground, semen dripping down his leg. He lay there, panting, and watched as his captor adjusted his clothing. It had been an act of aggression and dominance, less about sex than power and control, but he wondered whether maybe, now it was over, his torturer didn't feel disgusted both with himself and the man he had so ruthlessly raped.

"Is that it?" Leo drawled slowly. "Not the best I've had." He gave a wry, twisted smile. "You could work on your technique, and, y'know, dinner and a nice bottle of wine first are always nice. Oh, and consent." He grinned broadly. "Yeah. Consent is pretty important too. You might like to remember that." He wasn't even sure what he was saying, just that he needed to say something to save face, to negate the huge, hideous pain and humiliation of what had just been done to him. He didn't want to think about that right now...wasn't sure he ever wanted to think about it. Mr. Magoo looked angry, but then he usually looked angry. Leo rolled onto his front and vomited all over the floor. There was very little in his stomach to come up, but whatever there was surged out of him in an explosive spasm, and, when he was finished, he looked up to find his torturer looming over him.

"Not laughing now, are you, Captain?" Mr. Magoo observed chillingly.

Leo shook his head. "You think that's it? You think that what you did makes me fear you, or respect you? You think that settles every single damn problem between your country and mine, your beliefs and mine? It doesn't. It was nothing. If that's the best you can do then I don't need to fear you. In fact...I know you'll never fucking break me down now – you're never gonna get that confession out of me. Not now. Not ever." He grinned, and his grin widened into a full throated laugh, and the next thing he knew the sole of a black boot was coming towards his head and a few seconds later, mercifully, he blacked out.

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## Chapter 8 by Xanthe

Friday Night

"He raped you?" Jed said softly, and Leo winced, visibly, at the word – a word he pointedly

hadn't used during his stumbling, disjointed description of what Mr. Magoo had done to him. Then, for the first time since this part of their conversation began, he raised his head and looked Jed in the eye.

"Yes," he replied and Jed wondered whether maybe Leo was accepting the reality of that word and what it meant for the first time since the rape had happened, 30 years previously.

They both waited, and they both knew what they were waiting for, and then it came – a wave of blinding emotion coursed through Jed, and he suddenly found his feet again, strode angrily over to the wall and slammed his fist against it, cursing under his breath the whole time. Leo sat on the couch, watching, and when Jed finally finished hissing expletives he got up with a sigh.

"And he wonders why I didn't want to tell him," he commented. "Jed, it was a long time ago and it didn't scar me for life. Yes, occasionally I get flashbacks, but then occasionally I get flashbacks to when I had measles as a kid." Leo shrugged. "It didn't change anything or affect anything – it sure as hell didn't affect anything between you and me when I got home."

"Damnit, Leo – this guy is a monster – a sadist, a murderer, a rapist...and you want me to hold meetings with him in my office? Are you insane? Do you think I'm superhuman? That I can just ignore everything you've said and offer this man tea and shake his hand as if I don't know what he's capable of?"

"Yeah. I think that's exactly what you're gonna do," Leo replied firmly. "Because that's your job, Jed."

"No, Leo, that is in no way my goddamn job!" Jed roared. "Christ, you can't stand there and tell me it is. You can't drop this kind of bombshell and then, effectively, tell me to ignore it!"

"Why is it worse finding out that he raped me than it was finding out he murdered Morelli, or tied my arms above my head and beat me until I lost consciousness?" Leo demanded.

"Because it is – for me, on a personal level. Not objectively, not rationally, but for me...as your lover," Jed said in low, rapid tones. "I'd feel the same if it was Abbey...you know that. I don't...I don't have any experience that can make sense of what you've told me, Leo. I just...maybe it's a guy thing...you understand that...if it had been me – if someone had done this to me, Leo?"

"I'd have taken a gun and hunted the guy down." Leo said quietly. "I do understand how it makes you feel, Jed. It's just that I have to be the one to stop you doing anything stupid."

"I want to do something stupid, god damn it!" Jed exploded. "I want to, Leo! He shows up here and you...you fall apart before my eyes..."

"Hmm, I'd quibble with 'falling apart'. I think I was more kind of gracefully giving in to it," Leo interrupted grumpily. "I think the whole thing has been very restrained in the

circumstances. If it wasn't for the nightmares, I'm sure I'd have been able to hold it together without anyone finding out."

"I'm glad you didn't! I'm glad I damn well know!" Jed yelled at him. "After thirty fucking years I'm glad you finally told me about something so huge...so big...something that affected \*us\*, Leo."

"It didn't affect us. It only affected me!" Leo protested.

Jed raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying that what affects you doesn't affect me, Leo?" He asked, in a quiet, deadly tone. "Because if you are then your view of what our relationship is and has been for the past 40 years is a completely different one from mine."

Leo gazed at him helplessly for a moment, and then his shoulders slumped despairingly. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," he sighed. "I just knew you'd be angry about it, Jed. You always get angry about this kind of personal stuff."

"I do not! When did I ever get angry?" Jed asked. Leo rolled his eyes.

"When I told you Jenny and I were getting divorced. The whole thing with your father. Countless other times." He shrugged.

Jed gazed at him for a moment, sensing somehow that they were straying from the point, and that Leo was trying to steer him away from the reality of the situation and into more familiar waters, where they could banter and pretend nothing had happened here this evening.

"Leo, you're not going to side track me," he said gently. "I think you didn't tell me because somehow you think you're going to taint me with your problems – or worse, you think I won't want to know."

"That's not true!" Leo protested.

"Maybe not the second part, but I think the first part is," Jed said. "Let's leave the MS aside, because the main reason I didn't tell you about that was because you were in rehab at the time and I didn't want that news to set back your recovery, and, like you said, the longer the silence, the harder it is to breach. I think you didn't tell me because you had it in your head that I had this perfect life, that I'd moved on, and you didn't want to bring me down by telling me something so horrific, so sad. It's almost like you think I'm one more person for you to take care of, like you took care of your mom and your sisters from such a young age, as if I won't have a use for you if you aren't there for me to lean on."

"No." Leo shook his head.

"Yes. You do it all the time. You take care of me, Leo. You're still doing it. Every day in the West Wing you do it. These past few days have been chaos down there because you weren't taking care of things, Leo, and god knows I missed that, but you don't have to do it at the

expense of yourself. We can all cope if we have to, me included. You're allowed to be weak occasionally, Leo, and sometimes you just have to trust that I'll catch you if you fall, because I will."

"I..." Leo shook his head, unable to speak, and his eyes were suspiciously misty.

Jed didn't say another word. He just went over to his friend and put his arms around him. Leo felt thin and even fragile in his embrace, and Jed felt guilty for continuing this conversation when Leo was so obviously close to the edge. They stood there for a long time, and all Jed could think was how he might have never known this life. "I could have lost you," he whispered. "Thirty years ago, I could have lost you, and led a completely different life. It might have been a simpler one..." he felt Leo give a wry chuckle against his shoulder, "but it wouldn't have been such a good one," he murmured. He squeezed Leo firmly, needing to feel his lover's solid flesh. Leo had been such an enormous part of his life – his friend, lover and confidant since he was 17 years old, that it tore him apart to think of how close he had come to losing him. Finally, they drew back, and Jed looked into Leo's grey, haggard face.

"We can talk about this more over the next few days. There's nothing we can't solve, Leo. We'll figure it out – but right now I think you need to get some rest."

"I do feel pretty beat," Leo admitted. Jed gave him a little smile and then went to the bed and pulled back the sheets. "You're not going to fuss over me as a result of all this are you?" Leo asked suspiciously.

"I don't see why not. You always fuss over me when I'm down," Jed replied.

"That's because secretly you really like it and secretly, I really don't," Leo pointed out grumpily, sitting on the side of the bed. "Jed, I'm no different from how I've been for 30 years. There's no need to treat me any differently..."

"Leo, you *are* different because a few days ago your life was turned upside down and it's really fine for that to make you miss your stride for at least a minute or two," Jed told him firmly. "I know you like to just carry on and pretend nothing is amiss when you're hurting but this is too big for that. You must see that. And anyway, even if you aren't any different as a result of what happened this evening, I *am*\*, and you just have to live with that. And besides, I don't think it's that you don't like being fussed over – I think it's that you won't let yourself like it. And now – you should just accept it because it's going to happen anyway." He put both his hands gently on either side of Leo's head and bestowed a single long, heartfelt kiss on his friend's sandy hair. "Get some rest," he said softly when at last he released his friend. Leo gave him a wan, faded smile, removed his bathrobe and slid into the bed, and Jed pulled the sheets over him.

Jed went to the bathroom, closed the door quietly behind him, locked it, and then silently placed his hands on the wall and rested his head on his hands. His legs were shaking and he felt physically sick but this was no time for him to fall apart because Leo needed him right now, however much he might be trying to tough this whole thing out.

Jed pushed himself away from the wall and ran a basin full of cool water. He splashed it on his face, and then looked up at himself in the mirror. For just a second, he thought he caught a flashing glimpse of a handsome pilot in his Air Force uniform over his shoulder, and then it was gone, to be replaced by a scene from his imagination. He could see Leo being forced down over a table, hurt and humiliated, and he fought the tide of nausea again. He didn't have time for this right now. Instead he cleaned his teeth, got undressed, pulled on his pyjamas, and then shouldered himself into his bathrobe. Leo was on his side, his eyes closed, when Jed returned to the bedroom. He slid in beside his friend and then pulled Leo over, so that his head was resting on Jed's chest.

"There was something I forgot to say," he murmured. "When I was being angry and behaving like a jackass back there. I forgot to say I'm sorry – I'm sorry something so terrible happened to you, and, more than that...I'm sorry I wasn't there to help, that you had to go through all that alone. I'm completely broken in two about that."

"You were thousands of miles away," Leo reminded him softly. "There was nothing you could have done."

"I know – but I'm sorry anyway," Jed told him. He kissed Leo's head again, and his friend turned his face to greet him with a proper kiss, on the lips. They slid down the bed a little and rested there, Leo ensconced in Jed's arms.

"I'll see Stanley," Leo said after a few minutes of silence.

"I wasn't going to insist," Jed replied.

"Sure you were." Leo gave a little grin.

"Well, not tonight anyway – I was going to insist tomorrow," Jed replied, returning the grin.

"The man really will think that everyone in the entire administration is unstable and neurotic," Leo warned.

"Who cares?" Jed shrugged.

"I expect he'll want you to join in for a session or two as well," Leo commented.

"I'll be happy to attend, if it'll help," Jed replied, truthfully enough.

"You'll hate it," Leo pointed out.

"Yeah, but I'll be happy to help if I can," Jed said with a shrug.

"It's going to be messy," Leo sighed.

"Yeah, but the worst is kind of over isn't it?" Jed murmured softly. "Now I know – I'm sure there are plenty of details you left out, knowing you, but telling me had to be the hardest



part."

Leo nodded. "Yes. I guess so," he said. Jed felt a surge of protectiveness and he wrapped Leo up in his arms, and hugged him close. Leo came willingly, and Jed was reminded of how his friend had clung to him like a drowning man a few nights ago. He squeezed Leo reassuringly, and kissed his friend's head again. This was good. They could stay here like this all night if necessary, talking on and off, the way they often did, just dozing and talking. He thought Leo needed that right now and he was more than happy to oblige. There was silence for a long time, and then Leo shifted.

"You know I'm gonna want to..." he began.

"Yeah. I know," Jed interrupted, sighing dramatically. "I was just, you know, delaying the moment."

"Only, without playing on what happened, that was kind of one of the things that I thought about while I was a prisoner. A lot."

"You're warped, you know that?" Jed grumbled, but he shifted down the bed amiably enough, and allowed Leo to reverse their positions so that he was now lying with his head on Leo's chest. A few seconds later he felt Leo's fingers combing their way through his hair. He would have complained some more but he really liked having his hair stroked, as Leo well knew, despite all Jed's protests to the contrary.

"It feels strange – someone knowing. I never told anyone about that last part, Jed. The torture was obvious enough when I was in the hospital but I didn't tell them the other part. So, you see it wasn't just you – I never told a living soul what else he did to me until tonight." Leo's voice was taut with emotion. Jed put his hand over Leo's free hand, and began caressing it gently with his fingers.

"Not Jenny?" He asked softly. He felt a tremor go through Leo's body.

"No. Not Jenny. Definitely not Jenny. I don't know how she'd have reacted. Our lives were pretty strange as it was, and she did well accommodating my feelings for you in our marriage but I think that might have made her wonder a little too much about the guy she'd married. I didn't want her knowing anyway, Jed. I wanted to keep her and you as - this is hard to explain and I know you feel betrayed and angry that I didn't tell you - but I wanted to keep some part of my life where he wasn't...can you understand that? Some part of my life where he wasn't known, where he had no place. He had to be in the past, or I..." Leo paused and shook his head. "I thought he was in the past until a few days ago and that was the way I liked it. His reappearance forced me to confront some of what happened...and the flashbacks haven't been pretty."

"That's understandable. Leo - I really do understand," Jed said, glancing up. "Yes, you're right, I'm angry – I'm incandescent with furious rage to the point of boiling over - but not with you."

Leo frowned and Jed shook his head.

"Leo, I'm angry with him – and that emotion feels so explosive that I don't know where to go with it – it's okay, I'm not going to insist on a replay of our earlier argument about what we do about him – I just want you to know that I'm not angry with you. Christ, how could I be after what you went through? Leo, I love you, and I'm upset beyond belief that you went through such a horrific experience. I'm just glad you're here with me now."

Leo didn't say anything but his fingers were relentless as they quested almost desperately through Jed's hair.

"Do you think he recognised you?" Jed asked softly.

"Thuan?" Leo's entire body stiffened and then relaxed again. "No. I don't think so. I doubt I've featured in his nightmares these past 30 years the way he's had a starring role in mine. I also doubt I was the only one he tortured – so no. I don't think what he did to me was all that unusual or important to him so I don't suppose I've remained etched in his memory."

There was another long silence, and then Jed remembered something.

"There's something I have to give you," he said, disengaging himself from Leo's arms and getting out of the bed. He went to the bathroom, retrieved the letter from his suit pocket, and then returned to the bedroom. "Here. I should never have taken it," he said softly, getting into the bed again. He handed Leo the letter and his friend took it slowly, his hands shaking slightly as they folded around the thin, faded, blood-stained sheet of paper.

"Thank you," Leo said, and his voice didn't sound too steady. He caressed the piece of paper for a moment, and then shook his head wryly. "Although...I don't need it any more." Jed gazed at him, not really understanding. "I really don't need it any more," Leo murmured but Jed noted that, despite his words, Leo tucked the letter carefully into his pyjama pocket anyway.

They talked and caressed each other long into the night, until, finally, Leo fell asleep but Jed remained awake. He wanted some time to himself, time to think over what he had learned this evening. He didn't want to pressure Leo, but at some point they had to make a decision about what to do about Thuan. Jed knew he could order Josh to deal with the guy, and hope never to bump into him at any official function but this sounded to him like one of those political compromises he had to make all too often in his working life and he was damned if it was one he could tolerate on a personal level. On the other hand, he had as little enthusiasm as Leo did for bringing a case against the Ambassador. Leo was right; the chances of success were slim after all these years, and his stomach contracted with uneasiness at the thought of Leo telling the world what had been done to him so brutally all those years ago.

Jed lay awake for another couple of hours, and then he disengaged himself from Leo and got up. He stood for a moment, looking down on Leo lying fast asleep on the bed. Even asleep, Leo looked haunted and pale, and Jed felt a surge of fierce, protective love for his friend.

Leo was so self sufficient and capable that sometimes it was possible to forget that he needed Jed just as much as Jed needed him. Jed occasionally wondered if Leo even knew that he loved him as much as he did. Leo's love was so steady and even, and he showed it in so many small ways; in his constant presence, and calming, soothing advice; in the way he took a dozen hits for Jed every day of his political life without flinching; in his sensual, tender love making. Jed knew that he expressed his love for Leo in more extravagant, explosive gestures, and he wasn't sure if Leo knew just how much his love was reciprocated. Standing here, watching over this man he'd loved since he was 17 years old, Jed felt an icy resolve settle into the pit of his stomach. He couldn't bear the thought of Leo being tortured and raped, but he accepted that it had happened. What he could never accept was that the perpetrator should be allowed to walk away, without being made to pay for his crimes.

Jed bent and dropped a kiss on Leo's sleeping head, and then turned and silently left the room. He made his way along the corridor to his private study, and sat down at his desk. He hadn't been lying to Leo about his anger – he believed in righteous anger, believed in fighting evil wherever it was possible. Maybe Leo could squash this back down, and resume the polished diplomatic face of the seasoned political operative, but Jed was a different kind of personality; he wore his heart on his sleeve, and he knew that he could not do what Leo was suggesting. There had to be another option, and if there was, Jed intended to find it. Nobody hurt Leo and lived to end up as an Ambassador to his administration, with all the kudos and perks and comfortable living that entailed. Nobody. He knew people were sometimes deceived by his folksy, charming exterior, but Jed could be every bit as ruthless as Leo when necessary – maybe even more so. The question was – what should he do? His starting place seemed clear; while Jed believed that Leo was sure that Ambassador Thuan was Mr. Magoo, he needed to be certain in his own mind.

Jed reached for the phone, and quietly placed a call to the FBI.

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One Week Later

Leo donned his usual working uniform of suit and tie. He might only be going to have breakfast with Jed at the Residence, but he felt more comfortable in these clothes – especially as he intended to drop by the office later to do as much work as Jed would let him get away with. He had to admit that he was feeling better. Jed had insisted that he take a week or two off work, and see Stanley, and although the therapy sessions had been a struggle at times, Leo felt happier in his own mind than he had since he had first come face to face with Ambassador Thuan. Stanley actually seemed quite pleased to be dealing with a complex trauma case – Leo chuckled, remembering how Josh had told him that Stanley thought his case was too simple, and recalled Stanley's faint protests that Jed's sleeping problem was probably not trauma-related at all. Leo's case, on the other hand, was meat and drink to Stanley, and Leo's estimation of the psychiatrist's skills had risen dramatically as the other man had probed his way through his psyche.

Leo pulled a comb through his hair and then studied his reflection for a second; he was starting to look better. He even felt vaguely embarrassed about the whole thing; Leo wasn't

one to wallow in his own emotions – he preferred to channel his energy into his work, and taking care of the people he cared about – but on this occasion, even he had to admit that this was too big for him to handle on his own. Still, now he was over the initial shock, he wanted to do nothing more than bury it all back down again and get on with his life. It had taken Stanley's gentle persuasion, together with Jed's much more forceful words on the subject, to get him to agree that, on this occasion, that wasn't an option.

Leo had insisted that he wasn't going to stay at the Residence throughout the whole process. He needed the peace and quiet of his hotel room to occasionally retreat into. Jed had been reluctant to agree to this at first but Stanley had finally managed to convince him that Leo's wishes should be paramount, and they had agreed that Leo would join Jed every morning for breakfast – which was pretty much their normal routine anyway. Leo also dropped in on Jed in the Oval Office frequently as well; he didn't like admitting it to himself, much less Stanley, and definitely not Jed, but the truth was that he needed to see Jed frequently, even if just for a few minutes. While he had been a prisoner, it was his thoughts and memories of Jed that had kept him going, and seeing Thuan had, according to Stanley at least, taken him back to that time – a time when Jed had been out of reach, only now he was close by and Leo could take all the reassurance from his presence that he needed. Leo thought that kind of made sense but it annoyed him anyway as it felt pretty ridiculous after all this time. He had a great fear of being a burden, especially to Jed, but Stanley had told him there was nothing wrong with asking for help occasionally, and the truth was that Jed seemed pleased to help, even when he was busy. Leo was slowly coming to see that his habit of taking responsibility for everyone had sometimes kept them at arm's length, and made them feel they couldn't give him anything in return.

Leo glanced at the nightstand, where Jed's letter lay. He had hated having to admit this to Stanley as well, and hadn't yet told Jed - although he suspected his lover might have guessed something about its importance - but he still felt he needed to carry the letter around with him. Maybe sometime soon he'd just wake up and forget to take it with him, but he wasn't there yet and Stanley seemed to think it was fine that he took it with him for now, although Leo suspected that Stanley would also think it was fine if he declared that he wanted to abseil off the Washington monument – the psychiatrist seemed to be a great believer in doing whatever made you feel better which wasn't an attitude of mind that Leo wholeheartedly endorsed. With a sigh, Leo picked up the letter and placed it in his jacket pocket. He'd keep it with him for another day. Maybe tomorrow he wouldn't need it.

Leo left his hotel room, pausing to pick up the newly delivered newspaper on his way out. He glanced at it as he made his way down the hallway towards the elevator, and then stopped, his attention caught by one particular article. He stood, in the middle of the hallway, reading, his forehead creased into a deep frown, and then, eschewing the elevator, made his way down the stairs as fast as he could.

Jed was already seated at the dining table when Leo strode into the room half an hour later, slamming the door angrily behind him.

"What the hell have you done?" He hissed, throwing the newspaper down in front of the President. Jed glanced at it, and then glanced back at Leo.

"What makes you think I had anything to do with this?" He asked.

"Jed, don't play games with me!" Leo snapped. Jed paused for a moment, and dabbed his mouth with his napkin.

"Not so long ago..." he began, sitting back in his chair, "you came to me and convinced me that I had to order the assassination of the Qumari minister of defence, Abdul Shareef."

"What the hell has that got to do with this?" Leo hissed.

"Shareef had committed crimes which we knew he couldn't be brought to justice for." Jed shrugged.

"This is different! We had a mechanism for seeking justice for Thuan!" Leo snapped. "I just chose not to take it."

"I know – and that's why I chose not to hand out to Thuan the same justice we gave to Shareef. Relax, Leo – I didn't order Thuan's assassination."

"As good as!" Leo snapped. "Do you know what the penalty is for drug trafficking in Vietnam, Jed? He'll be executed the minute he's back on home soil. Are you seriously telling me that you didn't get someone to set him up for this? It's not as if you couldn't – but we...we don't \*do\* things like this. The minute we do, we're no better than the people we're supposed to be fighting against!"

"Leo, it's not what you think." Jed shook his head. "Sit down. Please. And listen to me." He gestured to the chair beside his own, and eventually, stiffly, Leo sat. "Leo – forgive me, but I needed to be sure," Jed said softly. "I know you were convinced Thuan was the man who did those terrible things to you, but it was a long time ago. I wanted to believe you – I \*did\* believe you, but I had to be sure you were right, and that it was him."

"You called the FBI," Leo said slowly. Jed nodded. "And you found out that it was him," Leo said firmly, without any shadow of a doubt.

"Yes." Jed's mouth was set into a thin, hard line. The strange thing about Jed, Leo thought to himself, was that you never knew just how much inner steel ran through the man. He could play the funny, forgetful, folksy uncle, so frequently, and with so much love for the role, that you sometimes forgot just how strong and smart he was – or just what lengths he'd go to in order to protect the people he loved. "I had him thoroughly investigated, Leo – checked down to his birth weight and what he likes to eat for breakfast. He was in the right place at the right time to be Mr. Magoo. He even had laser eye surgery a couple of years ago. His dark side took a while longer to uncover, but a personal request from the President gets results pretty damn quick – and we found a somewhat unsavoury personal history. At least two women have brought complaints against him for sexual assault, complaints that didn't get to trial either because they were bought off or he was protected by his diplomatic immunity and managed to pull strings to prevent it ever coming out."

"That's different from drug trafficking," Leo pointed out.

Jed reached for his briefcase, and withdrew a file, which he handed to Leo. "I had the FBI dig a little deeper. I was already disliking the sound of this guy, and I thought he might have some more bodies buried in his back yard, so to speak. Either way, I didn't like the idea of having to do business with someone who is little more than a gangster. You can read what they found." Jed nodded at the file. "The reason he's so knowledgeable on the subject of Vietnam's heroin trade is because he owns a large chunk of it – and you can be sure that any help we gave him to fight this trade would end up going straight into his own pocket, one way or another. He was playing us for fools, Leo, and if it hadn't been for what you knew about him, we'd have gone along with it."

Leo gazed at the file wordlessly. Everything Jed said was here, fully substantiated, and yet...just how ruthless could Jed be, if it really came to it, he wondered?

"He was deported," Leo murmured. Jed nodded.

"Yesterday afternoon. I was going to talk to you about it when you got here. I'm sorry you had to find before I had the chance to do that. I wanted to be the one to tell you."

"You could have falsified this report. The charges could have been trumped up." Leo gazed at Jed and his friend met that gaze, unflinchingly.

"Yes I could have done that," he said.

"Did you?" Leo asked, his heart pounding.

Jed shook his head. "No. I didn't," he replied.

"And if you had, wouldn't you lie about it?" Leo asked softly. "To protect me?"

Jed gazed at him for a long time, and then sighed. "Leo, this did actually happen just the way I said it did. I can't prove it, so you just have to believe me."

"I'd like to," Leo whispered. "I'd like to believe that son of a bitch got just what was coming to him without any help from us."

"He did," Jed said firmly. "Leo, someone like that doesn't just change. After the war he climbed the greasy pole by being exactly who he is – a ruthless, violent, but extremely cunning thug. He hasn't changed."

"And now he's gone." Leo sat back in his chair and tried to figure out what his reaction was to this news. He supposed he should feel pleased, or at least satisfied, but he just felt empty.

"Yes. You're right – they'll execute him. He's a big name and we've provided them with

incontrovertible evidence. He can pull all the strings he likes, but they have no choice in the circumstances."

"It's just...for so many years he seemed almost unreal – just a character in my nightmares. Then he was here, larger than life...and now he's gone again. It's going to take a little while to adjust," Leo murmured. He hadn't realized until this moment how much Thuan remaining at large, still, theoretically, a risk (at least in his subconscious) had preyed on his peace of mind. And now only with knowing that Thuan was well and truly gone did he feel that weight lift. Maybe it wouldn't take him so long to adjust as he thought. The bogeyman from his nightmares could disappear back into the past, where he belonged, and he could resume his life, knowing at least that this chapter of his past had been brought to a close. There was little satisfaction to be had from it, but there was a sense of closure, of ending, and the quiet knowledge that an evil man was no longer at liberty to harm anyone else.

"I know." Jed said, and Leo emerged from his reverie to find Jed gazing at him sympathetically.

"And what about you – where do you stand with this, Jed? Spiritually, emotionally and psychologically?" Leo asked softly. "You've as good as condemned Thuan to death, and I know that doesn't sit easily with your religious values, or who you are as a person. I don't want you to feel compromised in any of those areas because of me – that's the last thing I want."

"That's something that'll have to come up in my next confession," Jed replied with a wry shrug. "But I didn't make the laws in Vietnam that will send him to his death, Leo – I'm not the primary actor in Thuan's fate. I do accept that I'm involved and that's a grey area but..." Jed trailed off with a faded smile. "I just did what I felt was right. If I was wrong, I'll stand by that – but it's not your fault and you don't need to worry about it. I can tell you that of all the difficult decisions I've had to make as President, this was one of the easier ones, my friend."

Leo nodded, accepting that at face value. He didn't like the idea of Jed being compromised in any way as a result of his problems, but he knew that Jed was involved, whether Leo liked it or not, so it was just a question of them both learning to live with what had happened.

"Leo – I've cleared a couple of hours in my schedule this morning. I thought we might need to talk this through. I was thinking that when we're done we could...I dunno...play chess?" Jed suggested.

"We could." Leo shrugged, deciding to change the subject and lighten the atmosphere, which had become seriously strained. "Or we could have sex."

"Leo!" Jed laughed, glancing around, but they were alone in the dining room.

"Well, you keep avoiding that subject like you think it's gonna scare me or something and it really isn't...and besides, if we've both got some free time..."

Jed gave one of those goofy grins he always gave when Leo suggested sex; Leo sometimes suggested it even when he wasn't particularly in the mood because he enjoyed Jed's reaction so much, and he never remained not in the mood by the time Jed was stretched out naked beside him.

"Now?" Jed had an anticipatory look in his eye that went straight to Leo's groin.

"Mmm. Well I did only just get dressed, but what the hell." Leo grinned. He felt they both needed to address this. Sex had always been an important part of their relationship, and while he didn't have a problem with it and never had, even after what had happened to him in Vietnam, he sensed that Jed was uncertain. He knew that this new knowledge had to have implanted some unpleasant images in Jed's mind, and he also knew that things wouldn't be entirely right between them until they'd made love again.

They walked up to the bedroom, side by side, their thighs brushing occasionally. Leo felt as if they were playing hooky; there was something intrinsically sinful about going to make love at this time of day when they should both be working. He wondered how odd they must look, Jed holding his briefcase, and Leo clutching the dossier Jed had given him, as if they were going to a meeting and not to a bedroom to have sex.

The minute they reached the bedroom, Leo threw the dossier onto the coffee table, locked the bedroom door, and leaned against it, gazing at Jed hungrily. Jed hesitated, clearly unsure about how they should play this and what Leo wanted from it.

"Come here," Leo whispered, holding out his hand, and Jed came. Leo undid his friend's tie and then unbuttoned the top button of his collar. "You're all starched," he commented, brushing a kiss along Jed's collar bone. "Usually when we make love it's at the end of the day and you're rumpled, but now you're all clean and crisp." He undid a few more buttons and Jed allowed him to pull his shirt out of his pants altogether and throw it on a nearby chair.

"Leo..." Jed murmured, his eyes dark with arousal. "How would you feel if I went on top?" His hands were warm, heavy and reassuring on Leo's hips. "I figure it's going to happen at some point so maybe it should be now, when we're self conscious about it anyway? But it's your call. It's just a suggestion. I don't mind either way."

Leo thought about it for a moment, and then smiled. He remembered something Stanley had said about giving up control, and not needing to be the one always taking care of everyone else. It might be nice to let Jed do the work for a change. He loved playing with Jed's body, loved the feel of Jed's hips under his fingertips, and the tightness of his ass milking his cock; loved the way his friend would arch his back and mewl out his orgasm while Leo thrust lazily into him, but sometimes it could be nice just to lie back and let Jed take the lead instead. Jed was right as well – those mental images would remain between them for a long time unless they made an effort to establish some kind of normality again.

"Okay," he agreed.



"Sure?" Jed said, his hands wandering lower and coming to rest on Leo's ass.

"Sure." Leo nodded. "It was a long time ago, Jed. We've made love plenty of times since."

"For me it was just the other night," Jed replied, "and for you too – in that nightmare you had."

Leo had to admit that there was some truth in that. For years after it had happened, he had almost denied that it had taken place, but the events of the past couple of weeks had brought it sharply back into focus, and he could remember details that he'd managed successfully to forget these past 3 decades. Stanley said that reliving the event was common in trauma cases, but Leo didn't view himself as anyone's victim, and he didn't want to be just another 'trauma case'. Jed was right – now was the perfect time to do this.

They undressed each other slowly, taking their time, needing to re-establish some bonds, and then, naked, they sank onto the bed. They kissed for a long time, their hands wandering lazily over each other's bodies, and then Jed dipped his head and began licking and nibbling his way down Leo's chest towards his groin. He took his friend's cock in his mouth and Leo stroked his lover's hair as Jed sucked him for a few hazy minutes. They caressed each other like this for a long time, before Jed finally reached for the lubricant and condoms in the nightstand drawer.

"Ready?" he asked Leo, dropping a kiss on his lover's lips.

"Mmmm..." Leo lay back, feeling like an old lion relaxing in the sun, as Jed carefully stretched him with his fingers. He knew Jed was going more slowly than usual, and that they both needed to be relaxed. For a moment, when he closed his eyes, he could hear rasping breathing behind him, could feel the hard grain of wood under his face, fingers digging into his hips, and an appalling pain deep inside, ripping through him, and he shuddered.

"Leo..." Jed's face hovered anxiously into view.

"It's fine," Leo said, and it *was*. He kept his eyes open this time and watched as Jed slipped easily into him, and then his friend was leaning over him, his weight inside him, his blue eyes still anxious. Leo smiled up at him. This was nothing like what had happened to him. It was so completely different that there was no comparison. He relaxed, and closed his eyes again, and this time he experienced nothing except the exquisitely pleasurable sensations of being made love to by the man he adored.

They both came several tender, sensual, intensely enjoyable minutes later, and then Jed withdrew, carefully, and settled beside Leo. They lay there, lazily, arms wrapped loosely around each other for an hour or so, and then got up and took a companionable shower together.

Afterwards, Leo left Jed to dry his hair and returned to the bedroom to get dressed. As he pulled on his jacket, he patted the breast pocket where the letter was, just to check that it was still there. He thought that maybe he didn't need it any more. He had the real thing

now, after all, and that was much more satisfying. Maybe, when he got home tonight, he'd open up the safe in his closet and pull out the box where he kept his most treasured personal belongings, where this letter had remained for 30 years, kept apart from the other letters he'd had from Jed over the years, which he'd stored in their own separate file. Yes, maybe he'd do that. Maybe, also, one day soon he'd get around to telling Jed what his letter had meant to him during those lonely, nightmarish two weeks so many years ago. He didn't know where to start with that though. This scrap of paper was more than a letter to him; it had been a lifeline during a time when he had been lonely, scared and in terrible pain. He wasn't sure that he could ever describe to Jed just what this letter meant to him.

Leo sat down on the couch while Jed finished dressing, and started flicking through the dossier he'd placed on the coffee table.

"You feeling okay?" Jed asked, returning to the bedroom, doing up his tie as he walked. "Only, I should get to the office, but I want to be sure you're okay with this."

"I'm fine. I'm going to go through this thoroughly if you don't mind." Leo pointed to the dossier in front of him.

"I think that's a good idea. You have some old ghosts to lay to rest," Jed said gently. "You know where I am if you need me." He placed a hand on Leo's shoulder, caressing lightly. "Reading that file made me think about the reality of what it must have been like out there for you, Leo. I know you didn't tell me several of the details, and I know why. I just...I tried to imagine what you must have gone through and I don't think I can. It made me wonder how I would have coped in those circumstances."

"It's not something you can know unless you're in that situation. I didn't know – I kept wondering how long I could hold out until I broke. I still don't know. If I hadn't managed to escape when I did..." Leo shrugged.

"I'm proud of you, Leo, and I have more admiration for you than I can ever express," Jed said softly. "How does someone get through something like that? What the hell kept you going?"

Jed's warm body was pressed up against the breast pocket of his jacket, and Leo could feel that old letter, stained with blood, sweat and tears, nestled reassuringly against his heart.

"I don't know," he murmured softly as Jed dropped a kiss onto his head. "I really don't know."

**The End**

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