



Everyone sat up when Sara walked into the conference room. She set some files down and sat at the head of the oval table. Sara opened one manila file and leaned forward, rubbing her thighs, as if she were warming them. “Let’s jump right in, guys. We have a lot to cover. CJ? Who’s Uncle Daniel?”

“He invented trees.”

“Come again?”

“How would I know?”

She didn’t believe him; he saw it in her eyes. She squinted and cocked her head.

CJ tried to shake off his day, to forget everything he’d seen and done so far, to forget about killing space clones and traveling through portals. It was time to put everything on hold for the meeting—if possible. Time to switch gears. He sat stiff, no doubt uptight.

Sara flipped through the paperwork and said, “Well gang. I should probably start with some good news. Uncle Daniel has bought every seat in the house. We’re golden as far as contracts are concerned.” She looked at E. “You should be pleased with that bit of news.”

E stroked his ponytail and said, “Yep. I still got it.”

John leaned forward. “What’s an Uncle Daniel?”

“Sounds like a scalper,” Alan told John.

“Actually he’s not,” Sara argued. “But we’ll cover that in a minute. Let’s keep going.”

“Who else would buy every ticket, Sara?” Alan argued. “It needs to be reported.”

“Already did,” Sara said. “The purchase was made by a wealthy man in the city. He’s giving the tickets away—not selling them. Evidently Uncle Daniel is known for doing generous things for his city, and that’s that. We’re moving on.”

“I want you guys to meet Blister when we get back,” CJ said. “She’s

replacing Brandon.”

Sara faced CJ. “We need to do paperwork. Have her—”

“Okay,” E cut in. “John, take the chair. The reason we called this meeting *isss* ...”

John sat up. “The problem seems to be that CJ is always MIA. Am I right?”

“Basically, yes,” Alan told him.

“And I need to know,” said E, sitting up to face CJ, “what kind of scheme you’re gonna cook up. Don’t get me wrong.” He scanned the others for support. “We like what you’re doing. This is new age, cutting edge, hot shit here, CJ. But we have to know your plan.”

“I can’t tell you what I’m gonna do E, because I really don’t know. I have an idea, but it doesn’t always pan out the way I planned. So if I say *this*, but do *that*, it’s only gonna screw you up.”

Alan gripped the table and leaned forward. “CJ, this is not cool. Enough of this bullshit, man.”

“Have I thrown any gear out of whack? Interrupted the concert? Damaged the show? And I gotta say,” CJ faced E, “I’ve been ninja careful not to get in your way or step on toes. I need some leeway—for the shit happens factor.”

“I won’t agree to that,” Alan said. “Not for a minute.”

“Hold on, Alan,” E said. He rubbed his eyebrows, as if they gave him wisdom. “So ... you’re saying you need to fly free on this. Not tell anyone, anything?”

“I’m saying I’ll look after the show if you—yes, if you give me some room to breathe.”

“Okay, CJ. On one condition.” E grazed the room with a stern glare. “And this *stays* in this room.” He turned to CJ and pressed his finger to the table. “You tell the press the spectacles are my idea, that you’re following my orders. If you agree to those terms, I’ll look the other way.”

“Holy mama. That’s a pretty big lie, E. I know it’s standard for the biz, but can’t we just avoid the press and say nothing? I mean, if we all keep quiet, then there’s no issue.”

E shook his head no. “We need the press.”

CJ leaned forward. “I think staying quiet builds mystery.”

E raised his eyebrows.

“You’re fucking up this whole tour, CJ!” Alan said. “It’s only been a week and everything is bonkers because of you!”

“I don’t get it,” CJ said. “Haven’t I pulled through?”

“Yes, you have,” John said. “I have to admit that, but see, you’re not just leaving the team, you’re leaving us in the dark. It’s just weird that you don’t include the crew. *And* when you’re doing what you’re doing—which no one can seem to know about—we’re doing the work. We really could have used your help in Richmond. We had to load a truck, CJ, *load ... a truck!* And you weren’t there to help. And I’m sorry, CJ, but saying you were mugged just seems handy.”

E cut in and said, “Didn’t I see you in a Jeep last night? Isn’t that same Jeep parked outside the arena?”

“Jeep? Last night?” CJ froze. So busted. Before he could reply, John said, “That’s where we’re at—we don’t believe you, CJ. We like you, but in order to *keep* liking you, we gotta believe you. Help us fix that.”