Summary

or "Dammit, Genji!"

Zenyatta really didn't mean to put these kinds of ideas in Genji's head, but once Genji decides to meddle, there's little to stop him. Genji might be a fool to think there's hope for Hanzo, but he's not so much a fool that he thinks Hanzo's capable of finding peace all by himself. Fortunately, he knows just the guy...

Notes

So Nagaina dragged me kicking and screaming into this fandom, and the next thing I knew, I was writing a prequel fic to her excellent "Brothers In Arms". Since she's responsible, I dragged her kicking and screaming into this fic.

(Neither of us were kicking and screaming.)
Title comes from the very apt saying, "Never meddle in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup."

Enjoy. :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

There was a time in his life he’d have laughed his ass off at anyone suggesting he’d use the impressive alcohol tolerance developed drinking with the likes of Commanders Morrison and Reyes to shark people at pool in backwater tap rooms, but things being what they were these days, Jesse needed every advantage he had. There was a part of him that still thought it far beneath the talents of one of the most elite spies in the world, but that part of him always shut the hell up in the face of his powerful need to eat now and again.

Beneath him or not, it was better than his other options, which ranged from starving in the street all the way up to collecting his own bounty and few choices along that spectrum were tolerable, let alone attractive. So he let the bar see him slamming back shots of high-shelf whiskey, turned up the good ol’ boy aw-shucks charm, fumbled the first few games of pool he played with a couple of local boys, and when the pot was as sweet as he thought he was gonna get it, promptly cleaned the kitty with a casual asswhuppin’ from first break to finally dropping the 8-ball in the corner pocket.

The whiskey swirled a warm, pleasurable thing through his belly and his chest, barely enough to wobble him on his feet as he walked back to his no-tell motel room, counting his winnings. Wasn’t much, but it was more than he had, enough to carry him through another few days. Enough to get him to the next pool hall, anyway.

One pool hall at a time. He’d wonder how this was even his life, but he’s pretty sure the answer to that was something he didn’t want to examine too hard. If he did, soon he’d be hip-deep in the swamp of regrets and what-ifs, and right now the heat breathed so close the hair on the back of his neck was burning. He had no time to indulge in one-man pity parties at the moment, and even if he did, he never had fun at them anyway.

He kept half an ear alert for the sounds of disgruntled drunks coming up behind him looking for their money back as he ambled down the walk towards the room he rented at the very end of the row. He didn’t think they’d try anything without pouring more liquid courage down their gullets, but he was damned sure not about to get pinched because drunk dumbasses resented their loss of cash.

He eased into his room, checking automatically to make sure his security measures and warning systems were undisturbed. It’d been a joke in the old days, his methods of toothpicks and strands of hair, and he’d taken a lot of good-natured ribbing from the more tech-minded of his compatriots for it, but they’d never let him down and weren’t prone to jamming, scrambling or manipulating the way vid systems and motion detectors were.

Plus, he was cash-lean, and toothpicks came in boxes of a hundred.

Everything seemed in order, tiny spears of wood and lines of hair unbroken. Jesse sighed and relaxed, as he unbuckled his belt to kick out of his jeans, rubbing at the stiff muscles in the back of his neck in a fruitless attempt to knead the knots away. It had been three months since attention on him got a little too intense and he had to bug out, which meant three months of nights on shitty mattresses too small and worn out for his frame, sleeping light and paranoid and keeping his head ducked so low certain pixie-like women of his acquaintance would tower over him. Much as he wasn’t ready for a rocker or a walker yet, he wasn’t as young as he used to be, and broken bedsprings always played hell with his spine.

Still, he looked forward to crashing face first into the pillows, cos it had been a long day, and tomorrow wasn’t looking much shorter. And he turned towards the bed to do just that — crash
face first into the pillows — but he had Peacekeeper in hand and his pants back up around his hips almost before he’d properly registered the innocent-looking-and-thus-highly-suspicious manila envelope leaning against the headboard.

Someone was here, recently, without disturbing his simplistic but effective alert systems.

Despite the wariness still tensing his muscles, Jesse holstered Peacekeeper and reached for the envelope. Though the very, very short list of folks who were familiar with and could avoid his countermeasures wasn’t composed of all friendly faces, none of them were inclined to place bombs or lethal toxins in envelopes, and when he flipped the parcel around to see his name scrawled in an elegant, familiar hand on the wrong side to address, he squeezed his eyes shut and prayed for patience.

Genji.

Hard on the heels of his prayer came the kind of giddy, chuckling relief he’d never allow himself to vocalize, not the least because he couldn’t be a hundred percent sure Genji wasn’t hanging around somewhere watching for his reaction, and Jesse’d never give him the satisfaction. He slid onto the bed, leading with a hip, and thumbed the seal open, spilling a slender, flat tablet onto the bedspread, followed by a thick file folder filled with papers and photos. The last thing to tip out of the envelope was another, smaller envelope, cream-colored and richly smooth to the touch, stamped with a delicate brand of two dragon heads in the corner, and Jesse unfolded that first.

Jesse,

Please accept my apologies for any concerns or troubles my preferred method of making contact has caused you. It was certainly not my intent to add to your burdens, however briefly I did so, by leaving you an unmarked package on your bed while you are eluding high levels of scrutiny from law enforcement officials.

It has come to my attention that a certain individual of my acquaintance is in need of a man with your particular set of skills. Said individual is quite capable of handling most minor troubles that cross their path, but for some time their enemies have been co-ordinating and concerting efforts to end their life, and I’ve grown concerned with the odds of their long-term survival.

It has often been said between us, brother, that we need not keep track of favors owed and owing, but I am aware of how often you accidentally skipped paying your bar tab at the end of the night, so I have been keeping track, and currently, you owe me over twenty thousand, six hundred dollars. I would like to call this marker immediately due, payable in the form of protective services for the individual detailed in this dossier. Please contact me via the secured communications tablet at your earliest convenience to discuss the pertinent details.

Your brother in arms,
Shimada Genji

PS: Perhaps you might consider favoriting a cheaper brand of bourbon to ensure no one may gain this sort of leverage over you in the future.

Despite himself, Jesse guffawed at the post-script attached under Genji’s flawless calligraphy, shaking his head ruefully as he reread the letter. “Knew your generosity’d come back to bite me in the ass someday,” he said, then tucked the letter back into its envelope and turned to the thick file folder. “Then again, ain’t really in a position to not take the job, so let’s see what yahoo you’ve decided to saddle me with.”
The file folder brought a flush of nostalgia, because it was a biometrically sealed case he’d bet his belt buckle was refurbished Overwatch tech. The lock took his thumbprint and clicked obligingly open, and he pulled out the dossier of this “individual of Genji’s acquaintance” he’s about to start babysitting.

His eyebrows crawled into his hairline at the photo and the name on the first page of the file, and continued attempting to retreat to the crown of his head as he skimmed the document, trying to find the punchline or the cleverly-hidden gotcha that had to be located within.

There wasn’t one, no matter how hard he tried to figure out the part where Genji put the ha-ha. And there was no way that manipulative little shit didn’t leave a recording device somewhere in the room to capture his reaction, but Jesse was too well beyond his wits to find that either, staring at the cool, haughty expression of Genji’s older brother, the asshole who’d tried to end Genji’s life ten years ago, that stared up at him from the dossier.

Hanzo fucking Shimada?

And not for the first time, almost certainly not the last, in his association with Genji, Jesse’s voice hit a volume and a register sure to have dogs keeling over dead as he yelped: “You have got to be fucking shitting me.”

-----

“No, Jesse,” Genji said some time later, when the communications tablet connected throughout however many proxies and secure servers it was programmed to bounce along, “I am in fact not fucking shitting you. Nor am I joking, ribbing, pranking or funning. This is not an anecdote, trick, stunt, gambol, whimsy, gag, farce or antic.” He paused for a moment, tilted his head consideringly. “It may, however, be a shenanigan. I am undecided.”

“I swear to all that is dear and fluffy, Genji,” Jesse said from between clenched teeth, “I will hunt you down and take your thesaurus away.”

“Ah, you are a terribly cruel friend, Jesse,” Genji said, and the self-congratulatory smirk might not have been visible on his face, but Jesse damned well heard it clear enough in his tone. “I take it you have had a chance to read the dossier I sent you.”

Jesse massaged his forehead, tried to think of the best way to phrase the myriad, complex, conflicting thoughts that sprang to mind at that innocent statement. “You want me to watch your brother’s back an’ keep him safe from whatever sundry ninja assassins might wanna part his head from his shoulders?”

“That is correct,” Genji replied serenely.

It was effort on par with hitching a ride on a hover train to keep his voice in somewhat normal human range, and his fingers itched to reach through the connection and shake the hell out of Genji. “Have you up an’ lost what little damned everlovin’ sense you might’ve had to begin with? I take it you ain’t forgotten your little dust-up with him a few years back?”

“Hardly.” Unlike the last time the topic came up, nearly a decade ago, Genji’s voice held nothing but amusement and fondness, and that more than anything else made Jesse sit heavily on the end of his bed. “It is a complicated situation.”

Jesse snorted. “An’ you think mixin’ me into it is gonna, what, uncomplicate it?”

“It does seem rather counterintuitive, but yes. That is what I think. What do you think?”
“I think you’ve been sniffin’ the incense a little hard,” Jesse grumbled, massaged his forehead again and squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel his hairs going grey, one by one, right after the other, because there were damned few things Genji could ask him to do that he wouldn’t do, no matter how nutty they seemed. He heaved a sigh, gave into the inevitable, and stared glumly at Genji’s beaming face in the tablet. “Where the hell am I goin’ and how the hell am I gettin’ there?”

---

Irina Mouravi died slowly over a period of ten months. Prominent in the media as the wife of a post-Crisis hypertrain magnate and a self-made businesswoman in her own right, her sudden and tragic decline was chronicled by both national and international news agencies. She fell ill shortly after returning from an important science conference, complaining of the sort of nausea that, under other circumstances, might have been the herald of better tidings. By the time her grieving husband acceded to her prior directives and had her removed from life support, there had been little left of woman he married.

Exposure to dimethylmercury had that effect.

For three years, her relationship with Konstantin Vachnadze had been the storied fairy tale romance found amongst the young and enormously wealthy and covered in explicit depth by the tabloids, from their first meeting at an emergent technologies conference in Istanbul, to repeated “accidental” encounters in Mediterranean playgrounds, through a fabulous spring wedding in the Tbilisi Sioni Cathedral, and into what looked to be many long years of happy marriage in the mansion they purchased in anticipation of building their family. No intimations of imperfection or infidelity survived the Vachnadze clan’s management. Any hint of public indiscretion was swiftly and thoroughly crushed by their media connections.

If Konstantin was not the most incorruptible of spouses, it was not a topic that Irina chose to discuss except perhaps behind closed doors. She traveled alone for the sake of business, often enough to be herself vulnerable to accusations of infidelity should her in-laws have ever so chosen, and all parties had considerable amounts of money and public perception tied up in the union, as well as any genuine affection that might exist.

But one generally did not stumble by accident across one of the deadliest neurotoxins in the world, even at science conferences. Suspicion had immediately fallen first on the venue and then the other attendees, in particular the woman with whom Irina had publicly quarreled on the last day of the conference. Dr. Zhasmina Nuralova had been arrested at her office at the National Polytechnic University of Armenia, questioned for several hours, remanded into custody pending full charges. Sometime during the night, she found occasion to pen the world’s most melodramatic confession/suicide note and hung herself in her cell. The Vachnadze family begged for compassion from the public as Konstantin withdrew into semi-seclusion, and the investigation into Irina Mouravi’s death closed by the relevant legal authorities, to the satisfaction of at least some of those involved.

Irina’s estranged father and Dr. Nuralova’s family were not satisfied, and their combined means unearthed a credible alternative explanation, one that involved a nineteen-year-old model with whom Konstantin Vachnadze had conducted a not particularly secretive affair, the iron-clad nature of his prenuptial agreement he had, how much his family stood to lose when Irina filed for divorce, Dr. Nuralova’s concern for the safety of her childhood friend, and the Vachnadze clan’s numerous clandestine ties to Russian organized crime. It was highly unlikely that either of the murdered women would receive even a whiff of justice, given that justice was a wholly owned subsidiary of Vachnadze-Melikov Industries.
Which was, in fact, how Hanzo Shimada came to be sitting in a carefully constructed and concealed observation post a quarter mile from Konstantin Vachnadze’s third story windows.

Vachnadze was a creature of ritually enacted habits. He rose every day at precisely 7:00 am and 7:15 invariably found him opening the door that provided access to his mansion-villa’s rear loggia and the two acres of artfully sculpted garden that lay just beyond. He took his morning constitutional on the flagstone path surrounding a spring-fed pool lined in natural stone, ringed in arbors heavy with native flowering vines whose foliage was already changing color with the seasons, flowerbeds planted with hardy perennials, antique statuary recovered from the city bazroba. On warm mornings, the staff laid out his breakfast on the cast iron table on the loggia; on colder, he ate in the small dining room just on the other side of the windows. He left the villa in a private hypercar no later than 8:15 every morning and arrived at the offices of Vaschnadze-Melikov Industries in its gleaming futuristic tower in the city center of New Tbilisi by 9:30.

His technical position within the company founded by his grandfather and still overseen in total by his father was Vice President In Charge of Community Relations and Civic Engagement, which was the sort of make-work position one might offer to a disappointing younger son who possessed nebulously-defined-but-useful people skills, but who would otherwise be an absolute disaster at anything resembling crafting or executing long-term business strategy. It was, however, a position that he had taken to with significant personal energy. He spent the majority of his work days glad-handing with local politicians and taking meetings with concerned citizen groups, soothing down the ruffled feathers of environmentalists worried about the company’s plans to run additional hypertrain lines through sensitive biospheres in the Caucasus Mountains. His most recent duty, that of being the face of the company’s involvement in the Siberian refugee relief effort, was a recent acquisition, handed off to him six months prior by the spouse of one of his elder brothers. Rumor suggested it was because he needed more substantial work to keep his mind off the personal tragedies at home.

On Fridays, Vaschnadze had begun stepping out in public again, engaging in the first tentative emergence from his cocoon of mourning, attending concerts and film premieres with small groups of friendly peers, taking a light meal at a local chaikhana, paying a call on the Royal Bath House to take the healthful waters of the spa. He rarely went anywhere alone on those particular excursions, a fact that greatly limited their value to Hanzo, even if they took him into places that would in theory allow greater ease of access to his person.

Most evenings, Vaschnadze returned to his palatial villa some kilometers outside the city proper after putting in a full work day, took his dinner privately, had a second constitutional in the garden if the weather cooperated, and then retired to one of the homebody amusements cultivated in the year since the death of his lovely young wife. The cook that prepared his meals did not share the residence. Neither did the gardener who maintained the grounds, nor the cleaning staff that visited twice a week. All staff departed within an hour of their duties’ completion.

The level of security at the villa was typical of the wealthy industrialist class: old buildings ringed in worn but sturdy and artfully-reinforced walls, fitted with new blast-proof, bomb-proof gates, entry and exit controlled from the security station in the old gatehouse or from inside Vachnadze’s hypercar. At least one person remained on station at all times at the gatehouse monitors -- visual monitors, motion and heat detectors, pressure sensors in the top of the wall, the garden beds, the exterior pathways and staircases. At least four on patrol at any given time and two on station at different places inside the house, mostly covering the easy exterior access points on the first two floors.

Vachnadze’s personal quarters encompassed the entire third floor: personal entertainment suite, a bathroom equipped with every water-based self-indulgence known to man, a wardrobe that
occupied an entire wing of the building, a bed large enough to sleep six comfortably. It had been
remodeled quietly in the last three months, adding more security and removing the last vestiges of
what might have been a nursery, perhaps a sign that he was beginning to bridle under the
restrictions his family demanded of him as part of his reputation’s rehabilitation and their efforts to
avoid even a whiff of scandal.

Hanzo watched his target through the binocular ranging scope mounted to the edge of the
lightweight hunting stand on which he knelt, his bow resting on his thighs, arrows with their
specialized delivery mechanism warheads at the ready, waiting for the mendacious little slime to
get off the phone and settle down long enough to be shot. Something clearly had him in a bit of a
lather, pacing around the confines of his bedroom and gesticulating broadly at the wall-mounted
communication system, his face red from equal parts fierce emotion and several good-sized glasses
of chacha.

The split-screen holo-projection showed it was clearly a family conference of some sort. Not for
the first time Hanzo idly wished he spoke enough Georgian to read their lips as well as their faces,
for no one looked particularly happy. The target, in fact, looked as though he could rupture a blood
vessel at any moment and render all of his preparations purposeless. It could have been business
matters, he supposed -- Vachnadze-Melikov had suffered some setbacks of late when it came to
plans for expansion. It could have been matters closer to home, criticism of his target’s resumption
of prior habits, including the ones involving the proximate cause of potentially embarrassing and
expensive divorce litigation, at least twice in the last month. Whatever it was, it ended abruptly as
his target hurled the glass he was holding against the wall, made a number of impassioned gestures
to go with his equally impassioned words, and terminated the call. One of the security drones
stationed in the house investigated the uproar and was driven forth with his own set of gestures and
shouts, the most help that Konstantin Vachnadze provided in the entire month of their by necessity
abstracted acquaintance. Security being close enough to respond to indicators of distress was an
unfortunate risk in these particular circumstances, until just now.

The bedroom and the bath were part of the single master suite, located in the rear of the house,
overlooking the two acres of garden that Irina Mouravi designed and fronting on an undeveloped
span of heavily forested hillside. The nearest neighboring villa was, in fact, more than a mile away.
As a result, the target rarely troubled with drawing the curtains or commanding the windows to
take on any degree of opacity, and tonight was not an exception. Under normal circumstances, his
evening routine involved a considerable amount of time spent soaking in a bath deep enough and
large enough to qualify as an indoor swimming pool, one that was never entirely emptied, only
recycled through multiple layers of water filters. This evening was not an exception, either, and the
target stalked out of the bedroom, stripping off his workaday clothing and leaving it lay where it
fell, a cellular phone pressed to his ear. Hanzo locked the rangefinder’s heat-and-motion tracker
onto his signature and leaned back to let it follow him freely.

The arrows he selected for this particular task were a lightweight composite construction, ideal for
long-distance accuracy and strong enough not to splinter on impact. The warheads were a variation
of his own design and he armed them with care. He had three; in all likelihood, he would only
require one. The rangefinder sounded the gentle rising-falling tone that indicated its target was
motionless and he glanced through the scope to find Vachnadze sitting on the edge of the bath,
back to the window, the phone still pressed to his ear. Hanzo checked the range, made some slight
adjustments, set arrow to string, drew, and waited.

The conversation lasted only a few moments longer. The target hung up and tossed the phone aside
with a hint of weariness in the set of his shoulders and spine. Hanzo fired and, an instant later, the
warhead punched through the glass of the bathroom window, anchored itself in place, discharged a
secondary delivery of four flechettes the length of his smallest finger and, a fraction of a second later, another four as the target responded to the sting of the first impact. A glance through the rangefinder showed him attempting to reach his feet, discovering the inability of his own muscles to assist in that task, falling face-first below the level of the bath’s edge. He did not wait to see if the bathwater or the weaponized tetrodotoxin in the flechette reservoirs finished him first, as either was a better and swifter death than he deserved.

It took five minutes to break down and stow his equipment, significantly less to find the forest floor, covered in an inches-deep mass of sound-deadening evergreen needles. The hypercar he had rented in the name of his best-traveled alternate identity the month prior contained a realistically weathered quantity of camping gear, a handful of sketchbooks and associated artistic media, a folder of loose leaf sheet music, the hard-sided instrument case he used to contain the actual tools of his trade, and several changes of not-too-horribly overworn clothes. He input his chosen destination and preferred route into the vehicle’s self-navigation system and changed in the car as it began moving, avoiding the main thoroughfares that would have taken it into the city proper and picking up the M4 hyperlane south to Yerevan. Hypertrains to points east left hourly from the Trans-Caucasus Terminal at the edge of the capital and before the sun rose he was in Tehran, checking into the Persian equivalent of a capsule hotel to kill the handful of hours before his next departure with something resembling rest and, hopefully, real food. Before he closed his eyes, his own portable communication system pinged with a message indicating that a funds transfer completed successfully to one of his several accounts. He wondered, briefly, how Vachnadze-Melikov was framing the sudden death of its founder’s grandson before weariness overtook him. His sleep was blessedly dreamless.

oOoOoOo

The heat hadn’t quite died off and Jesse took two more days to continue moving fast and quiet through another handful of backwater towns before he was anywhere near comfortable enough to start sliding into character as one of his many alternate identities. Part hobby, part obsessive need to break Reyes’ brain with as many Old West references as possible, he spent a healthy chunk of his 20s creating new lives and inserting them into databases and registries, quietly waiting until he needed to use them, and most of them hadn't been touched in years.

He booked his flights under the name of Frank Canton, and took another half a day carefully making tweaks to Canton’s files to account for the seven or so years since last he slipped into the man’s skin. When he finally collected his passport and paperwork from a trusted contact, it was a disturbingly comfortable feeling, and more than a little wistful; Canton was almost flawless, the best of his creations, and maybe a life goal for Jesse, based as it was on an Old West lawman and one-time outlaw who died of old age after a lifetime of peacekeeping and gunslinging.

There were worse things to aim for, after all, than dying in one’s bed after a full span of years.

He got into Houston a little after midnight three days after his conversation with Genji, and immediately hopped a red-eye flight to Los Angeles. After a short layover where he did his damnedest to get comfortable on rigid plastic chairs too small for his height and too hard for his liking (in between justifying his travel plans with any number of customs agents who took interest in Canton’s business overseas), he found himself neatly crammed into business-economy for the twelve hour flight to Hong Kong, dearly wishing he’d taken the risk and upgraded himself to first class, if only for the greater leg room afforded rich passengers.

His seatmate, a pretty Asian girl with pink triangles accenting her cheeks and a rabbit-shaped backpack, was the chatty, bubbly sort, and after an hour of shooting the breeze with her in his broken Korean, he settled his hat over his eyes and folded his hands across his chest to catch some
shut-eye while he still had the wherewithal to do so.

He couldn’t sleep, because he never could doze off with his knees shoved up to his ears, and he had intel he needed to review regardless, but tried his best anyway. By the time he poked his head up from under his hat, coincidentally around the time the pretty gent with the flight attendant’s hat and scarf came by with his lunch tray, his seatmate was absorbed in some online game or another on a compact laptop adorned with cutesy rabbit stickers, and barely noticed he’d stirred beside her as she chattered a steady stream of Korean into her headset.

Mindful of where he was and the sensitivity of the dossier, he grazed through the plate of vegetables and what the airline passed off as Salisbury steak while flipping pages of the file in his lap. Hanzo Shimada had been a busy boy, according to the packet Genji compiled, and Jesse was fairly impressed with the number of kills credited to his name. He’d never really paid attention to international news except insofar as it applied to him and the ludicrous sixty million dollar bullseye he’d had stapled to his forehead since the fall of Overwatch, but he’d heard of at least a few of the deaths detailed in the files. More than one had had half the world, big and small, in a right tizzy, an uproar loud enough to penetrate down to his dusty corner of the American Southwest.

He was still trying to figure out just what the merry hell Genji was playing at asking-slash-blackmailing Jesse into partnering up with Shimada the Elder, because as many times as assassins had come for Hanzo’s head, they’d departed missing their own, and Jesse couldn’t see how his talents were particularly needed to assist.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that Genji was playing him good and proper, forcing Jesse out of the high-risk solo lifestyle he quite frankly thrived on living and into a no-less high-risk lifestyle wherein he happened to have a partner watching his back. And the fact that Genji’d told him Hanzo’s pride was enormous and would be told he was, in fact, looking out for Jesse’s long term survival instead of Jesse there to look out for his, only solidified those suspicions.

Try as he might though, Jesse simply didn’t have the heart or the energy to argue so much as the color of the sky with Genji, let alone talk him out of this harebrained scheme he’d clearly spent hours fine-tuning. Sometimes, it was much easier to just let himself be manipulated than it was to spend his strength fighting against what was, ultimately, inevitable.

And, he figured, locking the dossier away again and turning to the tiny round window to watch the ocean and the land sail past far beneath him, it might just maybe be nice to have a partner again.

Even if it was an uptight, murderous sonuvabitch blood-related to the one person on Earth with unlimited power to upend his life and damage his calm.

Not long after the attendants came around to collect the lunch trays, Jesse tipped his hat back over his face and folded his arms across his chest again. The chronometer had his flight time at just under three hours now, and he was pretty sure he once his boots hit dirt, he was going to take to the whole situation like a duck took to napalm. Pointless or not, now might be the only time in the foreseeable future he had a chance to close his eyes and get some peace, so he was going to make the most out of it while he still could.
Chapter 2

Chapter by ficlicious

It was a slightly less than eight hour flight from Tehran to Kathmandu, and there were a handful of seats still open on flights that would be boarding within the next hour or two. Hanzo perused them as he sat in the terminal-side chaikhaneh consuming a reasonably authentic Persian breakfast, sipping a completely authentic cup of intensely strong Persian tea, and contemplating a pair of grainy photographs pinned below the departure and arrival times on his tablet.

One he had lifted from the security system belonging to one of the buildings standing alongside Shimada Castle, a chance capture by a scanning exterior camera pointed in just the right direction at just the right time to catch a shadowed flicker of silver and glowing green as it went over the castle wall. It was blurry and indistinct, but still recognizable in its proportions, enough so that an image search for others like it had produced a single matching hit. In it, his brother stood on a wooden walkway joining the upper stories of neighboring buildings, silhouetted against the intensely blue sky, silver armor shining in the sun. Hanzo could not tell precisely what he was doing but at the instant the picture was taken his body language suggested the absolute and entire focus of his attention was the Omnic monk hovering in mid-air at his side. It was the Omnic monk that led him back to the picture’s source, the travel blog of a wealthy European tourist, and the place where it was taken.

The monastery of Shambali, where Omnic monks dedicated to the peaceful co-existence of humans and machines had retreated to refine their philosophy and teach it to those who sought it out. They accepted postulants of all origins provided they came with an open heart, a handful of “enlightenment tours” marketed to the rich and spiritually vacant, and their website indicated that volunteers were always welcome to assist at the monastery itself and with their regional outreach programs, guided by the civic minded among the monastic population. A place where his brother, as of a few months ago, had stayed long enough to be photographed, whether he realized it or not.

The world is changing once again, Hanzo, and it’s time to pick a side.

It was, he was forced to admit, exactly like the brother he remembered to throw such a challenge at his feet and in the most maddening way possible. It was entirely like him to make such a demand without defining the parameters of the conflict or the nature of the threats involved or what the consequences were for success or failure. Genji, as a child and then as a young man, had never bothered with such considerations -- he chose with his heart, and therefore any cause with which he involved himself, any fight he picked, any reason he did anything at all, was by definition the right one. The righteous one. He had lost track of the number of times his idiot brother had come home bruised and bloodied, having been drawn into someone else’s battles, the number of times he had quietly helped him clean up sufficiently to avoid the wrath of their mother (falling on him) and the wrath of their father (falling on whoever had dared lay hands on his favorite son). It was exactly like the brother he had once known -- the brother that had been his, before their father’s lingering final illness, his shockingly sudden death, his own rapid ascension to rulership of the clan -- to assume that his side was the only one worth choosing.

Perhaps I am a fool to think there is still hope for you, brother. But I do.

It was also exactly like the brother he remembered to slip something like that, double-edged and almost gentle, between his ribs and then vanish into the night, leaving him with no trail to follow and nothing but questions that would inevitably demand answers. Questions such as how are you alive and where have you been and what do you want from me? Answers which were, at the
moment, less than eight hours flight time and three days’ travel into the Langtang Himal, if the mid-autumn weather chose to cooperate. He watched as seats sold and flights left the terminal as his tea grew cold in his hand until there were only two reasonable options left, his finger hovering over the screen to purchase the last minute nonstop flight in first class for a price that stopped just short of extortion.

His tablet chimed its incoming message tone: a text communication from the contract broker with whom he worked most regularly. He thumbed it open. *Your last clients wished me to express their profound thanks for your intercession in this matter and also to assure you that they will each have a Mass performed for the repose of your soul. I admittedly was torn about telling you that but, well, I thought you might find it at least transiently amusing.*

Hanzo closed both the message and the booking window, opened a second, and purchased a seat on the first available flight to Hong Kong. He thought fixedly of nothing during the first leg of the journey, burying himself in the depths of the newest Igarashi novel until the plane touched down in Bangkok, waiting out the layover until his next departure in the terminal bar closest to the gate and considering practicalities. A rental car for pickup on arrival, because he loathed taxis on principles both general and tactical. Several emails and one phone call to the neighbors to warn them of his impending return, lest they call the police to report suspicious activity in his long-shuttered flat. He remote-initiated an active security sweep as the plane descended from cruising altitude and by the time he had the keys to his rental in hand he also had a comprehensive report that indicated his home was as secure as he had left it -- which was to say, significantly more secure than the average for the artsy bohemian expatriate neighborhood in which he lived would suggest.

Fortunately, it was late enough when he arrived that most of his artsy bohemian expatriate neighbors were nowhere in evidence, either too deeply chemically altered, too deeply asleep, or too deeply engaged in their own affairs to take note and accost him, for which he was deeply grateful. Under normal circumstances, the individual his neighbors knew him to be would be entirely happy to engage in idle socialization across the back garden wall, in passing on the street, or in the halls -- he, as a general rule, was approachable, helpful, always willing to assist the process of carrying the shopping upstairs when the elevators were acting up or run errands for the ailing or overwhelmed. At present, Hanzo could think of nothing he wanted to do less than interact with another human being and those few who were still stirring permitted him to pass with a wave whose weariness was in no way faked. For perhaps the first time ever, he wished his security system required fewer steps to successfully confirm his identity and deactivate the non-lethal countermeasures that preceded the opening of the front door.

It was stuffy enough inside that he opened the storm shutters to allow fresh air in rather than activating the recycler, the scent of flowers bruised by a recent shower wafting up from the central garden along with the rain. Nothing had disturbed the monofilament traps stretched across the window frames or internal doorways, which at least relieved him of the potential burden of having to dispose of a headless corpse in some state of decomposition before he could take a shower and seek his actual bed. A cursory review of his accumulated mail showed the usual collection of receipts for autopaid bills, a note from complex maintenance that the lifts would be down for a few days for their annual safety inspection and upkeep, and six dozen invitations to various social engagements he had absolutely no desire to attend. He would attend a few of them anyway, because the person he was here genuinely enjoyed being lured out of seclusion to eat mooncakes and drink cassia wine and, if he was completely incapable of meaningful resistance, allow himself to be dragged onto the dancefloor once or twice. He suspected, tiredly, that here he was exactly the sort of person that Genji would have liked, a thought he crushed ruthlessly and buried in the back of his mind as he unpacked and stowed his gear in the walk-in munitions closet, unloading the tetrodotoxin-bearing flechettes into their own airtight container, closed and locked the door behind him.
He deposited the carry-on containing the laundry he would be doing in a few hours next to the bedroom door and the laundry clinging to his body promptly joined it. The day might come when he could spend weeks of his life shadowing the movements, learning the habits, and carefully planning the deaths of the intractably reprehensible and not feel the need to scrub off six layers of skin and be ritually cleansed afterwards, but he had not yet arrived at that point. Ritual cleansing was largely out of the question but the rest was not, and if his personal indulgences involved paying twice as much as everyone else in the complex for water usage, he considered that an acceptable alternative to feeling perpetually covered in a thin layer of filth. He turned on the lights next to his bed (undisturbed), retrieved his tablet (because if he was going to soak for an hour without falling asleep, the best means of avoidance involved concentrating on something), and found a heavy manila envelope, bound in green-and-blue silk ties, sealed in a wax medallion bearing the entwined dragon arms of the Shimada clan sitting on top of the covered ofuro, propped up at a jaunty angle on a selection of hair care products.

Hanzo immediately thumbed open his tablet and demanded a thorough review of the last several weeks of internal camera footage from his security system. The system responded to that request with what felt rather distinctly like a shamefaced admission of failure on its part when it turned up six frames of a sleek, silver armored figure wandering about the premises completely unharassed, pragmatically undetected, and leaving the package he currently held.

Part of him wanted absolutely nothing to do with whatever lay inside that deceptively innocent-looking manilla exterior. In his experience, the only things that came in plain brown wrappers were significantly more than a little obscene or else camouflaged to disguise their peril and, given the source, this had an excellent chance of being either or both. He could not imagine, and was not certain he wished to imagine, what could compel his brother to reach out to him in such a way -- when he manifestly knew where he was, where he lived, and could speak to him whenever he wished. Another, slightly larger part, was only barely resisting breaking the seal and tearing it open because it still had come from the hands of his brother, who was also alive, and even if he did not want to risk another face-to-face confrontation yet -- he could absolutely not blame him for that.

The seal cracked audibly as he snapped it free from the paper. Inside were three items: a small, lightweight tablet, a somewhat thicker biometrically sealed casefile folder, and smaller envelope of a significantly higher grade of paper, bearing the characters of his name in what he knew to be his brother’s best attempt at calligraphy. He heroically refrained from shredding it and instead carried all three to the bedroom, where he could use any of a dozen pieces of conveniently placed bedside cutlery to slice it open gently, which he did, and sat on the bed to read it.

Hanzo,

Please excuse the means I have used to contact you -- it seemed prudent, given the nature of our last discussion, to allow for a certain amount of minimum safe distance between us while we converse. My apologies if this seems somewhat excessive.

It comes to my attention that, at this time, you are between engagements. It has also come to my attention that a certain individual of my acquaintance is in need of a man with your particular set of skills. This individual is entirely capable of handling most minor difficulties that cross their path, having lived a life of considerable peril over the last several years, but recent events have altered the complexion of their future. Their enemies have made common cause with one another to coordinate efforts to end their life and I have grown concerned that this effort may succeed.

Consequently, it is my desire to hire you and your particular set of skills, to function as protective services for the individual detailed in the included dossier, at fair market value. Please review the enclosed information and contact me via the enclosed secured communication tablet when you
have made your decision, and to discuss pertinent details.

Your brother,
Genji

PS: Yes, my brother, if you choose to do this thing for me, you have chosen a side.

Hanzo laid down the letter and massaged his eyes, throttling a startlingly familiar surge of intense filial aggravation, before he picked up the dossier. The biometric seal responded to his thumbprint -- he did not want to imagine how Genji managed to acquire a copy clean enough for security purposes -- and clicked open. Gazing up at him from the surface of an international law enforcement issued wanted poster was a cowboy. Hanzo set the folder down on the bed, reached over to snag a pillow, and screamed into it for two solid minutes before he felt himself mentally and emotionally capable of returning to the matter at hand.

The cowboy was at least called Jesse McCree and he had, apparently, lived the sort of life of violence and iniquity that resulted in the possession of a bounty so outrageously huge that Hanzo actually made discreet inquiries into its validity on his own tablet. It was, and he stared at it, stunned, for a long moment, before he turned back to the dossier. A good bit of the more sensitive identifying information regarding document origins had been carefully and thoroughly redacted, except on those news items which were obviously lifted straight from publicly accessible sources, and all of it told the tale of a man who had attempted to do right only to find everything going wrong around him, with reasonably predictable consequences. Consequences with a body count. Consequences with more zeroes than the total GDP of some small developing nations. Consequences that dearly wished to remove the profound irritant he continued to be in certain criminal circles with the most extreme forms of prejudice.

Hanzo picked up the tablet that his brother sent and activated it. It declined linkage to his ridiculously secure home network and instead used its own, bouncing through layers of connection so dense he was forced to grudgingly admit that his idiot brother had learned something about operational security that finally stuck. As he watched, he composed in his mind the first words he would say and, by the time Genji answered, he had an entire opening speech drafted and was working on perfecting the word choice to properly express precisely what he was feeling and thinking at that moment.

“Exactly how do you know I am between engagements?” was what came out of his mouth and he cringed, internally, as his inner communications director came to a screeching halt while trying to choose between proper salutations. What was the proper salutation in this situation, anyway? He had no idea.

“And a good exceedingly early morning to you as well, my brother.” Genji’s synthesized voice, coming over the tablet’s speakers, sounded more than a little amused. “I see that you have received my letter.”

“Yes,” Hanzo replied tersely, and cringed internally some more, because this conversation was already going wrong and why, just WHY. “Are you serious about this?”

“I have rarely been more serious about anything.” And there was not a trace of amusement now. “As to how -- I have spent a considerable quantity of time developing significant skills in the areas of intelligence gathering and analysis. You are, admittedly, deeply skilled, highly trained, and naturally gifted, a true master of your art, but even you are not capable of completely evading all forms of detection.” He could practically hear the dry smile. “Just most of them, and the forms I have learned are particularly relentless and unique. Satisfied?”
“For now.” He took a breath and, through the gift of enormous self-control, managed to keep it steady. “The individual you would have me protect. What is he to you?”

“A brother in arms.” And then, more softly. “A very dear friend.”

Hanzo closed his eyes, breathed peace around the ice cold pain in his chest. “Why...are you asking this of me?” It came out sounding closer to why are you doing this to me? than he wished but there was nothing to be done about that now.

“Because I know if you give me your word that no harm will come to him, you will keep it.” The unshakable faith in those words made something inside him ache in a way that it hadn’t in more than a decade. “He will be safe at your side for as long as you draw breath.”

Genji did not say: you owe me at least that much, if not more. He did not have to, because the broken, aching thing in Hanzo’s chest was shouting it loudly enough for both of them. And his brother was even offering to pay him for the privilege.

“What do you say, my brother? Is this request of mine a worthy use of your skills?”

Choose a side. “Yes.”

“Good.” He could hear the shit-eating grin his brother’s voice. “Because he’s waiting for you at the international terminal at Hong Kong Skyport and he could really use a lift. Also: are you naked?”

“I literally just got home from killing the world’s most deserving business asshole. You left this,” he waved the dossier, “on my bathtub. Yes, I am naked.”

“You have obviously not slacked in your personal training regimen, I’ll give you that, brother,” Genji, the damned little troll, replied cheekily.

“Tell you friend that I am coming for him,” Hanzo growled. “But, first, I am having a fucking shower.”

He cut the call to the bright sound of his brother’s laughter.

oOoOoOo

Jesse shouldered his duffel, disembarked the gate and passed through what was laughably called “security checkpoints” — transport authority agents were notoriously lax on the destination side of a flight, figuring their colleagues on the other end had been thorough and perceptive, a fact which Jesse had exploited too many times to count in his sordid career as a government agent and his less-government but no-less-sordid career as a freelance busybody. The only possible bottleneck in his near future was Customs and Excise, but he wasn’t trying to get through legally as Jesse McCree. Here, he was Frank Canton, 30-something heir to the late Gabriel Canton of Canton Munitions, with nary a crime more serious than a couple of speeding tickets and drunk-and-disorderlies on his record.

Because, as Reyes had beaten it into his head years and years ago, people were far more suspicious of someone with absolutely squeaky clean abstracts and records than they were a person with speeding tickets.

Everything being in order, he pasted his best I-ain’t-here-ta-cause-trouble smile on his face, got his forms and passports and papers ready, made sure the bribe money he’d withdrawn from his rather impressively padded Canton accounts was within reach, and joined the line at C&E to wait his turn
for interrogation. For a godless, lawless freeport like Hong Kong, the line moved with swift efficacy, and one by one, the travelers in front of Jesse passed inspection and were released into the wild.

He was somewhat put out by the fact that the guy behind the counter barely glanced at him once he’d handed over his passport and dropped the industry standard bribe surreptitiously over the counter with it. He’d spent the whole flight mentally practicing his gentleman-of-leisurely charm, even gone through the trouble of slipping on the sports coat jacket over his best jeans just to add to the character, and it was all wasted effort.

Though, now that he thought about it, he wouldn’t put it past Genji to have arranged for his incident-free sojourn through C&E. He seemed to have thought of everything else. Little details like getting through Customs wouldn’t slip by him. The thought was a little sour, but Jesse decided he was allowed to have it as he collected his various paperwork and moseyed on through into the heart of Hong Kong’s foot-, land- and air-traffic problems.

The concourse looked so much like the Las Vegas Strip, just for a moment he had the crazy thought he’d gotten on the wrong flight and hallucinated all the time spent in the air. It had been years since he’d been here last, and that had been to a private runway on the edge of the airfield in the dead of night. If he’d known what kinds of decadent and iniquitous sins awaited inside, he might have grabbed Genji and Lena and gotten them lost for days in the casinos and brothels and full service luxury spas instead of exfiltrating their target.

Come to think of it, maybe that’s why Reyes had insisted they land as far away from the terminals as logistics allowed.

He strolled along the concourse, cheerfully rubbernecking at some of the more exotically advertised pleasure shops but declining to enter any of them, no matter how scrumptious the variously gendered beings artfully posed in the windows and doorways looked to his sensibilities. Not only was Frank Canton a man not likely to be caught in a whorehouse, legal or otherwise, he had to keep in mind that he was here to ostensibly keep an eye on Genji’s brother while never letting on he was doing anything of the sort. While it would amuse the hell out of him for his first introduction to Shimada the Elder to occur with some level of nudity, he had a feeling it would only come back to bite him in the ass in all sorts of unpleasant and not-fun ways at some undetermined point in the future.

His comm unit rang as he regretfully put the row of brothels behind him, and he fumbled it out of his jacket pocket, shifting his duffel to his other shoulder as he did so. The caller ID registered only “Unknown - Voice Only” and Jesse rolled his eyes as he latched the earpiece in place and thumbed “Accept”.

“Canton,” he said, in lieu of the snarky comment about how the obvious mystery caller is obviously not a mystery, because it would only trigger a like response from Genji and the last thing he wanted to do was forget he was another person in a foreign country and start yelling sensitive information like names and death threats into the line.

“Are you enjoying the delights of Hong Kong Skyport?” Genji asked, in a tone sweeter than sugar and such full of smug satisfaction Jesse wanted to turn around and get right back on the flight home, overdue bar tab be damned.

“They say a man can enjoy a full measure of vacation without ever leavin’ the terminals,” he says instead, and opts to take a hard right into the nearest casino because casinos had bars, and bars had whiskey, and whiskey was always beneficial to his nerves when Genji was calling the shots. “I’m beginnin’ to see why.”
Genji laughed. “I am sure Hanzo will appreciate not having to fetch you from one of the many delightful brothels you no doubt passed on your way to the Shattersea Palace Casino,” he said, and Jesse missed a step as he froze momentarily.

He recovered a bare fraction of a second later, and kept smoothly walking through the slot machines towards the bar he could see over the heads of the gamblers thronging about. “Anyone ever tell you how goddamn unsettling it is to know that, somewhere, there’s an overabundantly-armed ninja with both the sense and the impulse control evolution gave a horny toad keeping an eye on their comings and goings?”

“They have indeed,” Genji replied cheerfully. “I took it as the compliment it was clearly meant to be.”

“I hate you,” Jesse said with utter sincerity, sidled up to the bar and eyed the bottles lined up on the shelves behind. “Do I have a ride comin’, or am I gonna have to hoof it to wherever it is I’m supposed to go?”

“My brother will shortly be on his way to pick you up,” Genji replied. “Try not to be too drunk when he arrives?”

“Goodbye, Genji,” Jesse said firmly, and cut the call on Genji's mocking laugh. Just for spite, he ordered the top shelf bourbon when the bartender moved down the line to take his order.

Drink in hand, he made his way through the tourists and casino staff towards one of the many secured kiosks scattered across the game floor, conveniently placed to better enable tourists parting with their money, and traded some of the credit on Canton's accounts for a handful of chips, and rattled them idly in his free hand as he searched for a free table. Despite being one of what was likely a ridiculous number of gambling establishments, the Shattersea tables were jammed full with folks in varying states of inebriation, slapping bets down and alternately cheering or groaning loudly when the results came in.

Maybe he was getting old, but goddamn, how did anyone think in here with the racket?

Then again, he mused, spotting a place open at a craps table near the door and sliding into it before anyone else could steal it, thinking wasn't really the point in a casino. When people got to thinking, they got to reconsidering their life choices. And when they got to reconsidering their life choices, they got to wondering why the hell they were halfway across the world waiting for a hoity-toity fratricidal asshole in the sphincter of neon-lit hell instead of shooting a friendly game of winner-takes-all pool in a dusty backwater to hopefully stave off starvation for one more day.

And he really needed to stop thinking, because him reconsidering his life choices usually ended up with him treading into some deep, dark, cold fucking waters better left untread.

-----

Some thirty minutes later and two thousand bucks (only fifty of which he'd walked in with and considered real) poorer, Jesse finished the last mouthful of his nursed-to-death bourbon and tipped his hat with a wink to the lady who'd latched onto his arm sometime into his third brief winning streak. She'd already moved onto the next lucky drunk, and he could recognize an on-salary distraction specialist skilled in misdirection and parting the unobservant from every cent the house could get back when he saw one, but he could also appreciate a flawless technique when he had one played on him.

He slid his empty glass onto a tray carried by a passing waitress, and tipped his hat politely to her.
too, pleasantly surprised when she rewarded him with a smile he'd bet his belt buckle was a hundred percent genuine. Chances were, he got it because he hadn't tried to grab her ass, which had to be a rarity for her, but hell, a genuine smile from waitstaff at a place like this was worth more than almost anything else.

He had barely made it outside the casino when his attention was abruptly hijacked by a loud, sneering, “Why don't you take your RealDoll and go find a private room at the whorehouse, baldy? No one wants to look at it or you.”

Maybe twenty feet down a side corridor across the concourse from the casino, two large and intimidating sorts with square heads and belligerent expressions loomed over two much smaller, slender individuals dressed in monk’s robes.

He was halfway to taking a step towards the altercation, introduce himself and his six-feet-four of vaguely threatening friendliness when common sense reared its head. What was he doing? In no way could he afford to blow his cover at all, let alone before he even set foot outside the skyport.

He had to grit his teeth and make an effort, but he managed to get himself turned around and facing back towards the exit without taking a step towards the monks and their aggressors.

And then one of the monks spoke. “Peace, friends. This is Tekhartha Shakatta, a being of honor and spirituality. Consider your circumstances. Assaulting us in such a public location will not do you any favors.”

It hit his ears as a boy's voice, cracking with puberty, soft and pleading for reason. “Aw, hell,” he groaned, and sighed as he turned around again. He'd met Shakatta once, visiting Genji years ago at the monastery, and liked her quite a bit. In back of his thoughts, Jesse heard Gabriel’s voice telling him to “stay the fuck out of it, mijo, it’s none of your business”, and dammit, that sealed it. He never did what Reyes told him to do outside the parameters of an op, and he wasn't about to start listening to old ghosts now.

He crossed the corridor in a few long-striding steps, surreptitiously unsnapping Peacemaker’s safety strap. He had no intentions of this being anything but peaceable, but his intentions and what actually happened never did intersect all that often, so it was best to be prepared, just in case.

“Did I hear the name Shakatta?” he drawled, laying the charm on thick as he crowded into the space occupied by the meatheads. “Pardon me, gents, but I ain't seen the Tekhartha here in quite a while. Dunno if you remember me, Shakatta,” he said, respectful but fast, before she started uttering any names starting with J or M. “Frank Canton. We have a mutual acquaintance who introduced us some years back.”

He never did learn the trick to reading Omnic’s expressions, but he thought Shakatta’s eyes glowed with sudden understanding. “Yes, Mr. Canton,” she said, and bowed politely to him, a bow he returned. “How have you been?”

“Passing fair,” he replied pleasantly, and nudged his hat up a shade on his forehead to keep peripheral vision clear to track the thugs. “I come and go with business opportunities, that sorta thing. Yourself?”

Now that expression, that eye port glow, he knew how to read: genuine delight in civil conversation. “I have been well.” She gestured gracefully to the boy with her, who hadn't relaxed an inch and eyed Jesse with wariness. His respect for the kid’s smarts shot up a few notches. “This is my acolyte, Ayo.”
“Pleasure,” he said with a nod and a smile. And that might have been the end of it, him making inane conversation with an Omnic and her acolyte until his ride showed up to get him, but the Asshole Twins clearly had different ideas.

“Hey,” the bigger one, still two inches and thirty pounds scrawnier than Jesse, said as he reached out to attempt to shove Jesse aside. “You got a thing for defending sexbots, jackass? Move along, or we'll make you.”

Jesse's back teeth ground together. *Ain't nothing ever gonna run smoothly,* he thought as he turned around to face the other two again. “Ain't no call for hostility,” he said, and did his best to not let the clenched teeth show through his smile. “We're all civilized beings here. I don't want no trouble.”

The shorter one, broader in the shoulders and heavier than his friend, raised a fist in Jesse's direction. Jesse supposed he should pretend to be a little intimidated, but dammit, he had shit to do and catering to some over privileged asshat wasn't anywhere on that list. “Too bad,” he snarled, red faced and showing teeth. “My daddy didn't fight in the Omnic Wars so a friggin' robofuck can float around pretending it's a person.”

The constant stream of slurs were starting to fray his nerves. “I'm pretty sure he did, son,” he heard himself saying, accompanied by a bunch of Spanish swear words in Gabriel Reyes' most exasperated voice in the back of his head. “Shakatta here is a person, positive about that. Ain't so sure about you, though.”

_Fuck,* he thought, _damned mouth always gets ahead of me,* tracking the wide eyed outrage and the beefy fist subsequently flying towards his face. *Ah well, never did take to safe livin' all that easily._

He caught the fist in his left hand, the one that Doc Zeigler was kind enough to install when he lost the original one and smirked at the succession of confusion, shock, and then fear edged with panic playing across Asshole Two’s face when he realized Jesse's arm was rock steady and not inclined to move, no matter how hard he tried to haul his own hand back.

“Said I didn't want trouble,” Jesse told him with a friendly smile. “Never said I couldn't handle it.”

“Marko!” the guy yelled, still trying to free himself from Jesse's casual grip. “Get the others! Dude's some sort of fuckin' cyborg!”

His eyebrow went up. “Others?”

But he needn't have asked, because Asshole One, Marko presumably, leaned back out of the alley and whistled loud and sharp, and six more guys with buzzcuts and belligerent faces appeared from the bar across the corridor. And Jesse's stomach sank just a little as he watched his chances of waltzing out of here unnoticed suddenly sprout wings and fly away.

Why did this always happen to him?

_Because you're an idiot,* Reyes’ ghost informed him crossly. _And the universe hates you. You give it a lot of reasons to._

Maybe that's one thing he couldn't really argue with the old ghosts about. Real or not, they had a pretty goddamn good point.
"I suggest you hurry," Genji murmured quietly in his ear as, for the second time that day he pulled his rented hovercar into the Hong Kong Skyport.

"Dare I ask?" Hanzo replied, subvocal, ignoring the efforts of an omnic valet to flag him down and choosing instead to park his own vehicle, slotting it into an area he knew from long experience was poorly visible to the stationary security cameras but not so much so as to acquire heavier than average attention from the semi-regular patrols.

"It seems that Jesse has found trouble. Or trouble has found him." Spoken with obnoxious good cheer under the circumstances. "It's sometimes hard to tell. He is in the concourse near Shattersea Palace Casino."

Hanzo swore quietly under his breath and lengthened his stride. Fortunately, the obscenely early hour worked in his favor for a change: the guards manning the terminal-side security checkpoints were an even mix of human and Omnic, and all of them were equally tired and bored. He selected the one who looked closest to passing out on her feet and, once she found the credit chip with a somewhat higher than average amount of graft loaded tucked into his identification, he was passed through without even a desultory interrogation, despite having been there less than three hours ago.

Shattersea Palace Casino lay in the exceedingly tacky Fleshpots of the Exotic East section of the Skyport terminal complex, the region marketed to tourists with more disposable income than good taste stuck in long layovers, or those wanting to be able to claim a visit to Hong Kong without actually setting foot into the city. He tried not to let it bode ill anywhere inside his mind that his… client…would choose to bide his time in such a place -- it might have nothing to do with him, after all, but be more in keeping with the tastes and attitudes of Frank Canton, the arms manufacturing heir, under whose identity he was traveling. Frank, Hanzo decided, could easily be exactly that sort of tourist. Fortunately, the concourse was, if not entirely abandoned, definitely less tenanted than it would have been during peak travel hours and he was able to lengthen his stride still further to the sort of brisk, businesslike walk that encouraged what others there were to get out of his way until he was nearly on top of the casino concourse. There, the crowd thickened a bit and declined to immediately give way. He slipped among the scattered groups of travelers, gamblers, and random bystanders -- who chattered amongst themselves and seemed to be exchanging bets in several different languages -- came to the other side, and discovered the source of their entertainment.

Frank Canton had a man approximately twice as wide as himself and likely outweighing him by a solid eighty pounds in a hold that would, in a few seconds, deprive him of his breath and his senses. Two others, neither quite so large as his current opponent, lay sprawled across one another a short distance away, having clearly suffered their own encounter with his skills as a hand-to-hand combatant. A twinge of admiration crawled through the back of his mind: he had refrained from killing both of them and neither, from cursory examination, appeared to have suffered any serious harm to anything but their dignity. At his back, and slightly to one side, an Omnic in the distinctive robes of a Shambali monk held off another with an impressive display of her own martial prowess, likewise taking pains to do no more harm than necessary. Between them, another monk, much younger, sat half-sprawled on the concourse floor, sleeve pressed to his bloody nose. Four more postured and hurled invective but had not yet engaged -- the rough crescent of onlookers offered alternating jeers and encouragement in the absence of Skyport security.

"Genji," Hanzo murmured, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes." Promptly. "And I see you."
"Security?" He asked, assessing.

"Distracted. Someone tripped an intrusion countermeasures system on the far side of the concourse." A certain impish amusement underlay those words and Hanzo found a smile curling his mouth in response to it.

"Good." Hanzo moved and the first of the four remaining found the fist he was throwing at the side of Frank Canton's head caught in an iron grip, its force and his momentum captured and redirected face-first into the faux-mother-of-pearl-but-actually-plasticrete façade of the casino. He staggered backward, stunned, and Hanzo completed the process by catching the back of his head and reintroducing it to the wall with significantly greater direct force. He fell, nose visibly broken, and Hanzo stepped over him en route to Two and Three. Two realized his peril the instant before it reached him and, even so, it was not enough to help as his legs were out from under him and he struck the concourse floor with sufficient force to rob him entirely of breath, a debility that Hanzo enhanced by bouncing his head once with precisely judged enthusiasm. Three managed to get a swing in but Hanzo elected not to receive it, slipping smoothly around the distinctly and almost insultingly amateurish effort, catching his wrist, breaking it, dislocating the elbow, and wracking his arm between his shoulderblades in a restraining hold that lasted until he, too, found his resting place forcefully against the opposite concourse wall. The entire engagement took no more than twenty seconds, just long enough for Four to realize that he had no more backup, staring dumbly at his fallen companions for an instant.

Then one of the monk's prayer spheres struck him firmly between the eyes and he went down with a groan and a thud.

A certain disappointed moan went up from the crowd, credit chips were exchanged among the betting participants, and they began dispersing back to their less exciting entertainments. Hanzo straightened up, adjusted the cuffs of the dress shirt he had not wanted to wear and had not intended to fight in, and turned to face his client. Frank Canton casually kicked the groaning thug at his feet to encourage his compliance with gravity, exchanged a quiet word with the monk and her student, and stepped over a few unmoving bodies as he drew close. Tall, broad across the shoulders, well-muscled, handsome and somewhat better groomed than the version of him from his Wanted posters. At his back, the monk gathered up her student and guided him in the direction of the First Aid station further down the concourse. "Well. Ain't you a sight for sore eyes."

"Mr. Canton." Hanzo replied and bowed, precisely. "My apologies. I fear that you have not received the welcome you deserved."

"None necessary." Canton glanced down. "I get the feelin' these ain't local boys."

"No." Hanzo stepped on the head of the one wandering back in the direction of full consciousness and bounced it off the floor again. "Shall we go? I would hate for you to experience any further awkwardness with security -- unless you wish to file a formal complaint?"

"That won't be necessary, darlin'." Canton grinned toothily and rested a hand in the small of his back as they walked away at a brisk but casual pace. "Honestly, all I want right now is a horizontal surface -- doesn't even have to be comfortable." Softly. "Just in time, Mr. Ishinomori, and thank you kindly for that."

"You are entirely welcome." Hanzo replied and surprised himself by meaning it.

Security rushed past them in the direction of Shattersea but, by then, they were nearly to the terminal exits and none of the uniformed guards paid them the slightest trace of attention. Nor were they stopped before they reached the hovercar, or when they pulled out of the parking block.
Canton, it seemed, was not overstating the nature of his weariness but settled heavily into the passenger seat, visibly resisting the urge to put it all the way back.

"The drive is not a long one," Hanzo assured him. "I live relatively close by for the sake of my work."

"Not a bad idea, that," Canton replied, and issued a jaw-cracking yawn -- adrenaline crash, Hanzo guessed, and likely a considerable amount of jetlag, the weight of both beginning to cling to his own limbs and mind, as well. "M' sorry about the mess. Wasn't my intent to start anything."

"It is my understanding that such things follow you." He felt a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth and permitted it to stay. "I suspect no additional trouble will come of this -- Genji was watching through the terminal security systems. I rather guess the concourse camera footage will be mysteriously corrupted."

Canton chuckled quietly. "You realize this means we're both goin' t'owe him another one, right?"

"Only too well."

Canton was drowsing by the time they reached the entrance to the arcology, short drive or not, and fortunately the lifts were still working because Hanzo was not entirely confident of his ability to carry that much dead weight up seventeen flights of stairs without attracting the attention of his neighbors. As it was, the earliest of the early risers were already out and about by the time they reached his door, meandering in the direction of the midlevel shops and restaurants for breakfast and then work, and there was nothing to be done for it as he disabled the security and ushered his client inside, waving away at least one curiosity-seeker as he did so.

"The bedroom is this way," Hanzo informed him as he stood just inside the door, conducting an admirably professional assessment of the flat's layout. "The bathroom is attached if you wish to shower, or bathe."

"I can't take your bed," Canton protested but let himself be guided down the hall.

"You can," Hanzo replied firmly. "If for no other reason than the lack of windows and the fact that the walls are six layers of bulletproof materials."

"Y'may have a point." Canton sighed and glanced over his shoulder. "Anything I need to know about the security system?"

"We will deal with that when we are both more awake." Hanzo said, and shoved him the rest of the way into the bedroom, closed the door behind him.

"Well... good night." From the other side, quietly. "Hanzo Shimada."

Hanzo pressed his back against the door as he felt the weight of that fall over him, his name in the mouth of a man who knew and loved his brother, and it took him a moment to find his own voice. "Good night, Jesse McCree."

oOoOoOo

For his first night in a new, untested, unfamiliar place, Jesse slept like the fucking dead and woke with the rising sun in the best mood of his life. He should have been tense and miserable, unable to relax one jot, a restless animal prowling his new cage, but what stress a short but sweet and sinfully hot bubble bath didn't melt away was abruptly leached from his frame by the cloud of thousand-count sheets and big, fluffy pillows that buoyed his face-down flop into cinnamon-cedarwood-
sandalwood-spice scented slumber.

It was still dark by the time he finally roused from dreamland, fully awake but utterly lazy, unwilling to pry himself off the mattress he was already half-planning to pledge devoted, lifelong commitment to. It took some time to come to full consciousness, his mind obviously luxuriating in the rare and treasured opportunity to not snap to full alertness the instant his eyes opened, because it was forever and a day before he could untangle reality from his dreams.

By the time he actually got on his own two feet, dim light gleamed from the automatic UV lamp poised strategically over the bonsai tree on the corner desk, suffusing Hanzo's bedroom with enough illumination to resolve blurry shadows into two-tone clarity. His jaw cracked with his yawn, which turned into a faint snarl at the staccato pop from his spine as he indulged in a full-body, full-reach post-slumber stretch that started at his toes and ended at his fingertips high above his head.

He couldn't remember the last time he felt so good, the last time nothing ached or pulled in a way that reminded him he was climbing through his thirties now, and should probably settle on a regimen of morning stretches on days he expected he might end up doing some enthusiastic dodging and maneuvering. Even the ridge of scar tissue encircling his arm's connection socket hurt less than it usually did, seemingly content to remind him it was there with the occasional faint twinge, not the usual cranky, pinching hell it preferred.

Not that he was complaining. Hell no, he wasn't. Any day where his back wasn't bitching and his feet weren't trying to walk off without the rest of him, and his whole body wasn't reminding him that the world was definitely made for smaller people was a goddamn gift and he wasn't wasting it. He planned to take full advantage of it right after he found wherever he'd dropped his duffel when his host firmly but politely shoved him in here last night. It wasn't in immediate sight, and Jesse frowned as he tried to remember if he'd brought it in out of the hovercar. He was consternated to find he actually doubted grabbing it, and shook his head with a rueful smile.

At least his traveling jeans were relatively clean, though he couldn't say much about the state of his shirt and sports coat. Even ignoring the fact that they still smelled like the air transport's canned, slightly stale atmosphere, someone else's blood was liberally splashed across the front. While he didn't think his host would take any great offense to Jesse having spilled another man's blood, it was terribly tacky to wear last night's fightin' clothes to the breakfast table in the morning.

He hauled his jeans on, tugging them over his hips and mourning briefly that his favorite belt buckle was tucked into the bottom of his duffel, deemed too risky for a more sedate man like Frank Canton to be sporting. He hoped his host wasn't in possession of delicate, fragile sensibilities as he gathered his soiled shirt and jacket from the chair into which he'd flung them, because he was going to be walking around bare-chested until he managed to get out to the hovercar. He'd long since stopped paying attention to the abrupt end of flesh and abrupt beginning of metal on his left arm, but it had a habit of giving people not expecting to see it a fairly nasty shock.

He padded out of the bedroom on silent feet, taking extra care to move quietly, since he was pretty sure that regular raspy sound was a lightly snoring assassin in the direction of what he assumed was the den area and hopefully also the kitchen. He'd burned a lot of calories not killing anyone last night, and hadn't had much to eat on the airplane before that, so the sooner he found the fixings for a meal the better.

The picture Hanzo made on the couch, curled so seriously into a pillow with his hair spread out above and behind him, was adorable in a way that kinda stole his breath unexpectedly. He blinked in wonder, couldn't help reaching out to twitch the slowly slipping blanket back over a perfectly
curved shoulder, and had to fight a sudden, intense urge to trace all that intricately swirling dragon ink that disappeared over Hanzo's shoulder and beneath the edge of the blanket. With his tongue.

*Whoa there,* he thought frantically, backpedalling like the couch was made of lava and retreating for the safety of the hoped-for kitchen. *That is such a bad goddamn idea, Jesse. You can't even begin to imagine all the ways that is such a terrible idea, so get it out of your head. Bad Jesse, very bad.*

He blessedly found much-needed distraction in the contents of the refrigeration unit in the kitchen. Rattered or not, he was halfway to starved but the fridge was distressingly empty of anything resembling fresh vegetables.

*Well damn,* he thought, staring into the forlornly white fridge as if glaring would make food appear, and scratched his head thoughtfully. *Leave it ta Genji to book me an Airbnb that don't like grocery shopping.*

Warily, he eyed the distant heap of assassin still snoozing on the couch-thing and wondered if he should wake Hanzo up, tried to calculate how much of a problem it would be to request access to the hovercar and then cajole him into a trip to the local market. He was working with less information than he normally liked for these kinds of situations, where his life was potentially forfeit in the attempt, so he chewed on his inner cheek and weighed his options.

He didn't like any of them, until a final option presented itself to him. The sound of a door closing somewhere outside turned his head automatically, and he found himself looking at a woman he assumed to be Hanzo's neighbour, coming out into her back garden with hand tools and a sun hat. He grinned, bright and happy, when he caught her openly staring at him situated in full visibility in the window, lifted a hand in a hello, and was *delighted* beyond measure when she returned his gesture by raising her own hand in hesitant greeting.

Hanzo probably wouldn't be happy, but given the choice between waking Genji's older brother with unknown trigger points, or sweet-talking a friendly-looking lady into loaning him a few desperately necessary vegetables, Jesse was going to do the more fun thing and hope his slightly rusty conversational Cantonese didn't fail him while he tried to socialize like a semi-normal human being.

**oOoOoOo**

The smell that reached him first, sunk deep in the grip of a comfortless slumber: a perfectly delicious aroma compounded of spice and sizzling oil and something mouthwatering cooking in the same, coming from somewhere unusually close by. Too close, in fact, reminding him of that handful of times that circumstances forced him to take shelter on the streets, waking to the scents and sounds of vendors plying their wares, and he woke suddenly, skull swimming with disorientation.

It took him a moment to process that he was sleeping on the kotatsu, legs tucked underneath the table surface, and not in his own bed, though he could not at that moment remember why. A lack of bottles or, for that matter, cheap vending machine cartons on the table argued that he had, in a sharp departure with prior custom, not indulged too heavily to bother with changing position when weariness finally overcame him. And that was when the sound reached him: two voices, one low, deep, smooth as a fine aged liquor, the other softer and higher pitched. Not only one but two others in the apartment with him.

Memory returned to him in a rush: the long flight home, Genji's message, retrieving his client. He had a confused and fragmentary recollection of shoving the man into his bedroom, fetching a fresh
set of bedclothes for himself, checking on him some time later, to see if there was anything he might require, and finding him sleeping naked, face down among the pillows, the length of his spine and the perfect Fibonacci curve of his ass the sort of temptation he was no longer accustomed to discovering readily to hand. He had drunk something, he remembered fuzzily, perhaps two or three somethings, to help steady his nerves and remind himself of who he was, not enough to render himself genuinely senseless or even particularly hungover. That, he reassured himself, was the jetlag.

He slid the shoji open that divided the sitting room from the dining room, just a crack, and peered through. Jesse McCree, internationally wanted fugitive from justice, sat at his ease chatting in significantly more than passable Cantonese with the youngest middle aged daughter/caretaker of one of his neighbors. Shirtless. Sitting cross-legged at his table, absolutely shirtless, jeans clinging to his legs in ways that should be illegal on the street and only dubiously allowable in private. But mostly: shirtless, the curls of his chest hair catching the sunlight with the faintest hint of chestnut red, a trail of the same meandering southward in a visually enticing fashion below his waistband. Hanzo realized he was staring at it, at him, at his naked chest and the hint of scars on his shoulders, and that his mouth was seriously considering watering and, with effort, wrenched his gaze away.

Spread out on the table between his client and his guest was breakfast of some sort, consisting of a dozen tiny dishes, and Hanzo could not imagine how that happened since he had put his regular grocery deliveries on hold when he departed to stalk the detestable Konstantin Vachnadze and had left nothing behind in his refrigerator that would rot before he could return to consume it. McCree said something outrageously flirtatious and his neighbor woman -- Meilin, he thought her name was -- giggled like a schoolgirl and he felt his world tilt ever-so-slightly more sideways than it had been twelve hours before.

"Well, look who's returned to the land of the livin'." McCree, of course, noticed the opening in the shoji first and turned to face him with a grin that had no right to be as dazzling as it was, given how little sleep they'd both had in the last few days. "Join us for breakfast, sunshine?"

Meilin glanced his way in surprise and, left with no gracious way to refuse, he murmured, "One moment."

He slid the shoji closed and extracted himself from beneath the kotatsu's table and nest of blankets -- how many blankets had he gone to bed with? It seemed like there were more than he remembered -- straightened the loose-fitting pants he slept in, found the yukata he did not recall removing and decided it was by necessity fit enough to wear in company. His hair had come loose in the night and so he took a moment to discipline it, tying it back in a loose knot, adjusting the drape of the yukata to mostly conceal his tattoo, and sliding the shoji back just enough to step into the dining room.

McCree poured him a cup of tea as he settled down in seiza at the low-lying table, legs still stiff enough that he did not eschew the use of a floor cushion. "Thank you…" His mind momentarily seized, not sure how to complete that sentiment, and settled on, "my friend."

"You are entirely welcome, darlin'." Up close, the grin was even more dazzling, utterly relaxed and effortlessly charming. "Miss Meilin helped me pick out some things she thought you'd like and I added a few of my own specialties -- we really oughta go shoppin' as soon as we can. The cupboard's a touch bare."

"My apologies. I did not have the opportunity to do so before your plane arrived." The tea was perfectly brewed, for which he credited Meilin's advice. "Thank you for your assistance, Miss
"Hwong. I hope my lack of preparedness has caused you no hardship."

"Oh, no. Not at all -- I have plenty of extra in my garden, and Lian -- Lian, from halfway around the courtyard -- has even more." Meilin had dimples, a fact he had not noticed before -- but, then, he had seldom been close enough to notice, even though their garden plots abutted, and she smiled even more rarely. "If you ever need or want anything that I grow, you need only ask, Mr. Ishinomori."

"I will keep that in mind. Thank you, Miss Hwong." Which meant, at least, that his own cover remained intact and he relaxed enough to turn his attention to the provender: a platter of omelettes, half the over-sized western version, neatly folded half-moons glued together with melted cheese, the other proper tamagoyaki, surrounded by smaller bowls of additives and side dishes, rice and pickles and cold tofu glazed in sauce and covered in shredded vegetables and he was relatively sure those were guacamole and some sort of salsa.

"You didn't tell me you had such charming neighbours, Kira-chan," Jesse said, munching on what could only be a burrito, the tortilla perhaps summoned by magic because this was Hong Kong and where the hell could he possibly have gotten them? "I mighta come sooner if I knew the company around here was even half as pleasant as I find it."

"Jesse has told me all about how you met in art school," Meilin cut in. "A terribly romantic meeting, by all accounts. Colliding on the quad and mixing your sketches in with his photographs when your bags broke open. Perhaps it was destiny?"

"I didn't quite put it like that, darlin'," Jesse said with a chuckle. "I think he was more offended his oh-so-serious still life studies were mixed in with the landscapes of a guy in cowboy boots actually named Jesse James." He shrugged as if apologizing to Hanzo for taking liberties with their cover stories, but he looked far too smug and amused with himself for believable sincerity.

"I was less offended by the cowboy boots and the landscapes than I was by the state of your dorm room." Hanzo replied, mildly tart, and filled his plate.

Meilin laughed, and Jesse joined her, and, from somewhere across the inner core courtyards and gardens, upon which his dining room opened through the balcony doors, came a sound not unlike a mortally wounded water buffalo bellowing its rage and pain to the uncaring world. All color immediately fled her face and she scrambled to her feet before either of them could offer her the slightest trace of assistance, fleeing to the opened doors. There she paused, and offered a quick but polite bow. "It was good to meet you, Mr. James, and thank you for having me for breakfast, but I must go." She paused, dithered for an instant as a second bellow echoed across the gardens. "We will be having an autumn moon-viewing party this weekend, on the upper tier viewing platforms. I hope you will both be able to join us."

And then she fled.

In the silence left in the wake of her departure, Jesse finished his tea, turning the cup upside down as he placed it back on the tray, face shifting into a solemn sort of expression. "That's an unfortunate sound," he remarked, off-hand and casual. "Hope it doesn't mean work comin' up in my near future."

Hanzo inhaled deeply of the steam rising off his cup and sipped. "As a general rule, I try not to work for, or on, my neighbors." The sounds echoing across the courtyard, a voice clearly raised, offering insult and criticism in terms no man of decent upbringing should offer any woman, much less his granddaughter. "I may be willing to entertain exceptions under particular circumstances."
"I thought ya might." Jesse -- Hanzo was moderately alarmed that he was actually thinking of him as Jesse and not McCree, it had only been a handful of minutes that they'd been awake together, what was his mind doing to him -- finished his extremely unlikely burrito and leaned back on his hands, inadvertently throwing the perfect qualities of his unclad chest into painfully sharp relief. "So. Tell me about yourself, Kira Ishinomori, so I don't fall over anything the next time I need to ask for a cup of sugar."

"I am not well-known among my neighbors." Hanzo replied, wryly, and sampled the tamagoyaki with a bit of guacamole dabbed on it, the combination strangely appealing. "For the most part, I keep to myself -- I travel a great deal for my work and I am occasionally gone for significant lengths of time. For the most part, they believe I do a great deal of work for wealthy corporate clients who wish to contract an artist who specializes in traditional forms, for which I am highly compensated. I do, on occasion, attend community gatherings and engage in helpful acts of personal care for some of the more elderly residents."

"And do they ever realize how close they actually come to guessing the truth of your...artistry?" Jesse shook his head, expression halfway between horrified and slightly amused. "Well, expect to attend more, I'd say. Mama Reyes didn't raise a wallflower or a shrinkin' violet. I intend to take every opportunity to behave like I wasn't raised by wolves and socialize with actual human beings."

Hanzo absorbed that, considered. "We met in art school. Did we live together then, as well?"

"I'd say yes," Jesse answered after a moment's pause of thought. "Not only does it lay the groundwork for why, after all the time you've lived here presumably alone without many, if any visitors, you've suddenly taken it into your head to move someone in with you indefinitely. It tends to relax people's suspicions about what's really goin' on when more than one person lives in a place." He poured himself another cup of tea as he eyed Hanzo. "I can almost guarantee, darlin', there's been talk of you bein' a serial killer, livin' on your own. Regular folks tend to suspect loners for any number of things they may not, or in your case definitely are guilty of doing."

"Point." Hanzo had to admit it, even as it made breakfast significantly less appetizing, his stomach curling slightly around what he'd already eaten. "What were we to one another then? What are we to one another now?"

For some reason, that pair of questions made Jesse grin in a thoroughly unsettling way. "Well," he drawled as he leaned back again on one hand, teacup in the other. "The first meeting I had with any of your neighbours occurred while I was half-awake, pre-caffeinated and half-naked. What do you think the most obvious conclusion they'll draw is?"

"Lovers, then." He took a sip of his tea and allowed its soothing properties to work their magic on his stomach. "A rekindled relationship -- and you traveled halfway around the world to join me in my adopted country. That is...not the least likely story I have ever heard and leads rumor in a somewhat more beneficial direction." He smiled wryly. "We left your duffle in the car -- I presume that was the only luggage you brought with you?"

"I tend to travel light by dint of necessity." He shrugged easily. "You can always explain a lack of stuff in bags with the old standby of the airline lost it, and most everything I need outside that duffle I can get in an in-country store." He paused, winced and made a rueful face into his teacup. "Wish Genji'd thought fit to brief me on your identity here," he muttered. "The shithead. Incidentally, Jesse James was a photography student at UNM roughly twenty years ago before he went to study abroad. I'm gonna need to polish the cover before I change out my idents and creds, though. I haven't used him in years."

"I will add you to the home network in a moment. We will need to establish your biometric security
credentials." It took far, far more effort than he liked to restrain a smile at Jesse's exasperation with his brother, a sensation so familiar to his own heart it was as though no time had passed at all. "To give Genji the credit he deserves, he might not have had much information about my identity -- I have questions about how he located me at all, which he has thus far declined to answer in detail. For your sake, and for the sake of blending in, I do feel we should place a priority on finding you a shirt that fits. And also restocking necessary supplies."

"The only shirt I had available had someone else's blood on it," Jesse said, unfolding his legs and standing up to start clearing away the used dishes and extra food. "I found the washin' machine, so if the blood came out, I'll have that, but one way or the other--" Hands full of dishes to take into the kitchen, Jesse turned a bright smile on him. "Be a sweetheart and get my shit outta your car, darlin'?"

"Of course, dearest." Hanzo replied, sweetly. "But first I must make myself presentable. It will not do to traumatize the neighbors too much on your first day here."

And, so saying, he went to find something of his own to wear, Jesse's laughter chasing him down the hall.

**ooOooOo**

Jesse lost the entire afternoon absorbed in carefully and precisely building the history and current life of a non-existent person he'd honestly only thrown together to see how many contortions Reyes' face went through when he realized what Jesse had actually named it. He should have been more prepared with a name and a cover story when Meilin had asked him the most obvious questions in the world, and it had been only blind fucking luck she'd mentioned Hanzo's artist persona ahead of asking him how they'd met.

"Alright," he called, keying in the final touches and sitting back to do another once-over of the file, now heavily cross-referenced with dates and times and backdated records. As tired as Jesse was, sitting so long at the damned screen, he may as well have traveled to all the places this file said he had. "Y' wanna come make sure I haven't contradicted anything you've already established in your life here, before we're gonna have to break up all over again because we just ain't communicatin' properly?"

Hanzo joined him at the terminal, leaning over his shoulder and scrolling through the files, scanning rapidly. "I see nothing that stands out -- I have generally implied that I am an American of Japanese descent, and that I studied extensively abroad. This merely codifies those suggestions more thoroughly."

"Right then." Trying to ignore how terribly close Hanzo was to his cheek, but hyperaware of exactly how much space remained between them at all points along the axes, Jesse executed the programs and released Jesse James, Christ help him if Reyes returned to haunt him for it, into the wild. "That's that," he said, probably unnecessarily, but his head was swimming again with the tantalizing smell he spent a full twelve hours face-down in. "Just a few housekeepin' items left, notably what side of the bed do you prefer to sleep on and what annoying habits of each other's we gonna have to get used to to make this tall tale function like it's real?"

Hanzo straightened, the line of his shoulders tightened slightly, and when he spoke his tone was planed perfectly neutral. "You should take the master bedroom. The arcology management allows a considerable degree of personal modification to the individual flats and I have adjusted mine to meet my needs for...significant personal security. I was not joking about the walls being bulletproof. And the emergency exit is located in the master bath -- there are others, but that is the simplest to access if haste is an issue." He paused, a ghost of a smile touching the corners of his
mouth. "I understand that my enjoyment of natto for breakfast is objectionable to some. Shower, then bathe. If you are going to experiment with my watercolors, please make certain to put the caps back on the tubes."

Jesse propped his cheek on a fist and waited him out, patiently biding his time until he could point out the obvious. "Then I suppose we're taking the whole rekindling the relationship story slow-like, since separate bedrooms ain't usually a feature in such occurrences. Presumably two people who enjoy each other's company and imply they fuck share bedspace." He couldn't help grinning just a little as he added, "Masterful dodge of the question, Shimada. That was so graceful I almost didn't notice you didn't actually answer me." He straightened then, rummaged in the duffle off to the side and held up his cigar case. "This is what most people find offensive. That and my language." He tilts his head, considering. "And how raw I like my steak. But I don't snore, I try to be a reasonable sorta fellow, and I always make sure my partner comes before I do."

"Smoke on the balcony." Was that a blush? Definitely. "It would be…unprofessional, no matter what our mutually acceptable cover might be. Surely you agree?"

For a brief moment, Jesse had to fight not to laugh, because his definition of "professional" had never and would never be anywhere near the industry-accepted standard meaning. "You're probably right," he said in lieu of the amused guffaws that wanted to claw their way from his throat. "But wouldn't it be more professional to make the cover story believable?"

What are you doing, Jesse? Bad Jesse. Do not flirt with Genji's brother. Do not flirt with the uptight assassin who not only knows where you sleep but makes sure no one kills you doing it. He was, quite frankly, a little surprised at his ongoing undamaged condition, given how he seemed to be aggravating Hanzo with every innuenduous word that came out of his mouth. Maybe he just needed to let this one go before he ended up stepping over lines he had no intention of crossing.

Hanzo, for his part, appeared to be actually considering that statement on the merits, head tilted slightly at a curious-bird angle that recalled his brother and not reaching for anything sharp and pointy. "It is not unreasonable to wish for my presence close by under circumstances of vulnerability." He finally said, after a long moment of contemplation. "The bedroom is large enough to contain both the bed and a futon, with a bit of rearrangement." A dry smile definitely came and went on the corners of his mouth. "I regret that I cannot tell you if I snore or not -- it has been some time since anyone has had cause to complain."

Jesse squinted at Hanzo just a little as he spoke, because something felt off about the way he was answering, but his poker face was probably the very best Jesse'd ever tried to read. He puzzled it over for a minute, turned it around in his mind, but it wasn't until that tight smile flashed across the aquiline face that the lightbulb went on and the cluebat connected. Either Hanzo thought he was misreading the frankly neon-lettered signals Jesse sent his way, or he thought Jesse was joking as a way to make it seem so absurd it was entirely beyond belief.

"Oh for the love of God," he said, thoroughly disgusted, and shoved his chair away from the desk as he abruptly stood. It was impulsive as all hell and likely to get him stabbed immediately, but those were almost always the best decisions to make. He sighed in utter, pure exasperation, hooked his hand around the back of Hanzo's neck, and hauled him in for proof: a fleeting but intense kiss as if his life depended on Hanzo's mouth. "I'm askin', not joking," he said roughly. "And I wouldn't be askin', if I was offended or unhappy with the cover story, Hanzo. Now. Are you sharin' the goddamn bed with me or not?"

Hanzo's hands came to rest on the flat planes of his chest -- not holding on, not pushing away, the line of his body tense, but not in a way that suggested violence in the offing. The tip of his tongue
darted across his upper lip, the gesture almost unconscious, eyes wide and locked on his face. "Your point regarding believability is a sound one." His voice was rough around the edges, almost hoarse. "I have been...without companionship for a number of years. I am uncertain how accurately I would present --" He swallowed, hard. "Yes. I prefer to sleep with my back to the wall."

"Perfectly doable," Jesse said casually, relieved that he'd accurately sussed the problem out and trying desperately not to let himself suddenly panic, because he'd just discovered that haunted, vulnerable-looking expression on Hanzo's face was doing things to him, namely rousing his mostly-dormant alpha male protectiveness in a suckerpunch. *Well, shit. You've always had a weakness for a pretty face who can cry on your shoulder and kick your ass at the same time, McCree,* he told himself, resigned. *You were screwed the second you opened that letter.*

Hanzo was still eyeing him, and Jesse could almost hear the last shreds of uncertainty audibly snap. Fuck it. When had he ever thought twice about something he knew he'd enjoy? "I sprawl," he warned Hanzo cheerfully, neatly covering the nervous tremor. And sure, a small corner of his brain screeched in high pitches of shock, but the rest resumed normal smartass operations smoothly. He slid a companionable arm around Hanzo's terribly tight shoulders. "Besides, you looked cold on that couch thing, and I've got a lot of body heat I don't mind sharin'"

"I do not doubt that at all." Under the warmth of his arm, those shoulders slowly relaxed a fraction, two. "Come -- we should, at least, restock the kitchen. I believe that I owe you a proper supper."
Chapter 4

The Green Sky Garden Arcology's central commercial district was five stories of boutique clothing stores, electronics shops, grocers of several nationalities, and restaurants serving cuisine from every corner of the Earth, and served as a work and leisure site for nearly ten thousand residents on a daily basis. Given the general composition of those residents, thousands of expatriates inclusive, Hanzo found going out amongst the late-afternoon throng significantly less stressful than interacting with the immediate neighbors in his accommodation block. For one thing, Jesse did not stand out as severely among the general population of the arcology, even at his height. Dressed in fresh clothing from his duffle, somewhat better groomed than he had been even the night before, he blended quite flawlessly into the artsy-bohemian thirtysomething set that spent most of its time occupying the commercial district concourses, drinking and conversing and occasionally doing actual work at all hours of the day and night.

Jesse took his hand as they left the flat and refused to relinquish it until they reached the little specialty camera store on concourse level three, keeping their fingers laced together and their mutually callused palms pressed close. It happened so naturally that it actually took Hanzo a moment to process it and, once he had, Jesse had simply acknowledged his awareness, offered him the world's most shit-eating grin, and began chatting about the need to replace the gear he'd somehow lost on the multiple-connection flight across the Pacific because the airline was certain to take its sweet time finding the rest of his luggage and if it arrived in one piece it'd be a miracle anyway. Hence the camera store.

Jesse James -- and that name itched something in the sedimentary layer of his mind where he stored his knowledge of American culture, but he couldn't quite place what -- was a professional photographer and turned the full force of both his knowledge and his charm on the hapless store clerk, allowing him to concentrate all his attention on their environment, the other people in it, the supreme unlikeliness that he'd been made at any point in the last twelve hours. No one had followed them. No one was following them. The store was all-but empty at that hour and the concourse outside in the lull between the lunchtime and dinner rushes for the restaurants, the afternoon exodus of salaried workers, occupied mainly by young parents pushing hover-strollers, sanitation crews taking advantage of the relative lack of pedestrians, and teenagers skipping classes.

"Ready to go, darlin'?" Jesse's right hand slid into the small of his back and gathered him close to his side, the other filled with heavy reusable canvas bags bearing the store's logo. "I seem t'recall you sayin' something about a welcome home dinner."

It took everything in him that was Kira Ishinomori to relax into that casually intimate touch, to remind himself that, as far as everyone around them would be concerned, this man was his lover not his client.

And whose bloody fault is that, anyway? The voice in the back of his mind that he associated with sense and reason muttered. Lovers. Why in the name of all the gods and your ancestors did you say 'lovers'? You could have said 'that you're a tactless lout with no sense of decorum' but what did you say, you fucking idiot? Lovers.

"I usually order my groceries in but, when I must shop, I tend to favor the shotengai on the third floor." Hanzo murmured. "We will find everything we need there."

"Well, then, lead on." Jesse returned the murmur, and added an affectionate nuzzle, taking possession of his hand again as they rejoined the minimal flow of traffic.
A selection of specialty food shops, owned and operated by Japanese immigrants, the shotengai reminded him sharply of Hanamura's own market district, which was why he generally only went there under duress. Walking among them with Jesse at his side felt, perversely, both more and less fraught: never would he have allowed himself to be seen in public with such a man at home, which made the entire thing seem less homelike and therefore more tolerable.

You are an idiot, His inner voice of reason moaned as he selected the proper cut of beef for the meal he was planning and asked the butcher to prepare it accordingly.

This is not going to work -- not in the long term and not in the short, The voice continued, sharply, as he gathered a mesh bag of lemons, ginger root, garlic, fresh chives, a substantial bunch of green onions and added them to the other items already occupying the cart -- and Jesse obviously had well-defined preferences when it came to snack foods of a Japanese origin.

He is not here for your sake -- he is here for his own. He is not your friend, and he never will be. Fortunately, they had the good-quality bonito flakes and a vast selection of vinegars and oils and somehow the cart had grown packages of noodles and tofu and several more cuts of meat and fish.

Genji sent him to you. He knows all he needs to know of you. And Jesse's hand slid broad and warm over his back and his cybernetic fingers closed around the bottle of plum spice tea syrup he had been holding before it could hit the floor. He blinked, dragged in a ragged breath, and turned to find Jesse standing two full hand-spans away, brows knit over his warmly kind dark eyes, expression one of evident concern.

When he spoke, his voice was pitched low. "You're crawlin' out of your damned skin, darlin'. If you need me to stop with the handsy act an' let you breathe, tell me."

An act, yes. Only an act. Remember it, you fool. Hanzo released his breath in a slow sigh and took back the jar. "I am fine -- it has just been a very long few days. Shall we go?"

Jesse insisted on carrying most of the bags, which was only sensible, given the nature of the thing: if one of them was going to have to fight, it would definitely be him. He also insisted on helping in the kitchen, and Hanzo surrendered on the point without much of a fight, setting him to work slicing garlic cloves into chips and mincing ginger and onion, juicing lemons, mixing together the prepared ingredients for the ponzu sauce. He had to laugh at the look on Jesse's face when he brought out his grill pan.

"We have got to get ourselves a proper grill." He muttered, and measured bonito flakes, soy sauce, and rice vinegar into a second bowl and set to work with the whisk.

He also insisted on grilling the meat, though he did so to Hanzo's specifications, which freed his own hands to slice scallions and chop chives and to compose the plates on which the tataki would be served, drizzled in ponzu and dressing, with bowls of freshly steamed rice topped in toasted sesame seeds, a salad of radish and carrot, and a selection of sliced pickles. Jesse greeted the meal with the enthusiasm of a man who had spent a disagreeable amount of time living off of fast food and the contents of an inferior class of vending machines, and said so.

"We have to work out a schedule. I have not cooked for more than one in…ever, really." He wanted to call the words back as soon as they left his mouth but Jesse, mercifully, forebore to ask and helped him clear the table and insisted on doing the dishes.

Dessert was satsuma orange cake, purchased rather than made, and hot plum spiced tea, which they took on the balcony overlooking the overlapping transoms that held the central core gardens, strung with crimson and golden paper lanterns and strings of pale golden lights. A dozen neighbors
were also out enjoying the fine, warm evening, perfumed with the scent of a half-dozen sorts of autumn-blooming flowers. Next to him, Jesse laid back in a comfortably cushioned seat and stretched out his long legs.

"That was wonderful, darlin'." He sighed, teacup in one hand and his tablet in the other. "I might just keep you."

Hanzo sipped his tea and said nothing.

**oOoOoOo**

You, his inner Gabriel Reyes cheerfully castigated him, are a fucking idiot, mijo. What the fuck did you honestly think you were doing when you decided sharing a bed with a murderous cabron with the emotional range of your uncle Reinhardt's unplugged power armor was the hill you were gonna fuckin' die on?

"Go away," he muttered crossly, pushing his shower slick hair back from his forehead and tilting his head backwards to let the water sluice away the shampoo. "Dead men don't get ta bitch at the livin' anymore. Besides, when have I ever given you a straight answer anyway?"

That's your problem, kid. Right on time, his inner Jack Morrison. You're keeping all your brains in your ass, and making shit decisions based on ... what? How good he smells? We taught you a lot fucking better than that. Steal his shampoo and get the fuck out before you end up dead or worse.

He sighed, reaching behind him to turn the hot water as far to the right as it would go, until the shower felt like tiny coals slamming into his skin. He leaned his forearms against the cool tile of the wall and arched his spine beneath the spray so the heat would hit the worst of his knots, scald away the dead and dry skin that tended to form along his left bicep and shoulder scars. He endured it with gritted teeth and a mind so focused on withstanding the pain it blessedly had no room for the voices of ghosts telling him what to do.

As always, there came a point where he could finally take no more and literally ended up jumping out of the shower unit with the water still running. He stood in the centre of the room, back screaming and trying to contort away from the minor burns covering his skin, and leaned over the sink while he caught his breath and the steam swirled around his legs.

He didn't have a good answer for them, himself, no matter how hard he tried. It was a complicated, tangled ball of reasons, good and bad, practical and personal, and the longer he tried to figure out a way to explain it, the more reasons he came up with and the more hopeless putting it into words became. It wasn't just that it had been a long-ass time since he'd physically slept with another warm body beside him. It wasn't just that any sort of extended social contact had been a hilariously distant fantasy he wasn't sure that raised-by-wolves joke he'd made to Hanzo had actually been a joke.

It definitely wasn't just that Hanzo was hands-down the scorchingest brood-lord Jesse'd ever had the pleasure of being foisted off on.

It wasn't even just that Jesse got edgy and unsettled whenever details were left untended. He had no earthly idea why in the name of Hades Hanzo had agreed to it -- except maybe he was tired of sleeping alone too -- but it soothed out the unease at the unlikely-but-still-possible exposure of their true identities through something as simple as observation or a missed surveillance device.

He sighed, swiped the side of his hand across the fogged mirror to clear the steam and scowled in frustration at his reflection. What did he think he was doing anyway? His life was surreal at the
best of times, but now he was in Hong Kong in a pretend romantic entanglement with the brother of one of his best friends because, apparently, at some point he'd let a psychotic absurdist with knife ankles and a streak of sadism longer than Jesse's rap sheet start writing the script.

It'd be one thing if Jesse just thought Genji was being a meddlesome dick, but he didn't think that was the case this time. One thing Genji had never done was lie to Jesse and as a consequence, Jesse had perfect faith in his information. Genji might have been the only person living or dead Jesse trusted to such an extent and while it did on occasion render Jesse wide open to however Genji took advantage of his trust to fuck with him, this was magnitudes beyond anything he'd ever done or would be likely to do.

*Then extract your head from your rectum, kid,* Jack said through a smirk somewhere in the mist of memory, *and pretend like you were a halfway competent black ops agent instead of stumbling around like a goddamn idiot.*

Despite himself, Jesse smiled, wistful and fond, huffed a soft amused noise and sighed. "Yes sir," he murmured, then reached into the still-running shower and shut the water off before towelling roughly dry and pulling his brand-new but holy hell, comfortable sleeping pants over his legs and tying it loosely at his waist. Maybe it was time he made a few discreet inquiries of his own, before something came at him sideways and took him off guard.

The air beyond the door couldn't have been cold, but his superheated skin took it like an Arctic blast, and he hissed involuntarily in pleasant shock as it wafted over him, soothed the scalded width of his back. He stuffed his worn clothing into the laundry receptacle and made a pit stop in the bedroom to rifle his cigar case out of his duffle and his tablet from the top of the dresser, then headed for the balcony.

"Shower's free," he called out in passing, though he didn't see Hanzo anywhere in eyeshot. "Dunno how big the hot water tanks are, but I don't think I used it all up. I'll be on the balcony if y'want me."

"Shall I alert you when I am finished my shower?" Hanzo's voice came from immediately behind him, and Jesse practically leapt out of his skin at how fast and how close it materialized.

"That'd be fine," he said as he turned around, trying to ignore the way his mouth went dry as the desert when his eyes greedily refamiliarized themselves with the lines and angles of his face. Hanzo seemed to have lost the nervous energy that had crackled under his skin during their shopping trip, but Jesse mindfully kept his hands to himself. "Got some readin' to do, so take your time."

He said nothing in reply, just inclined his head and disappeared down the hall. Jesse held his breath until the click of the door informed him Hanzo was out of sight and, due to the sound-resistant materials in the walls, out of earshot, then released it all in a long, drawn-out huff.

"The fuck am I doing?" He scrubbed his face and sighed heavily, sinking back against the counter and trusting it to support him. He had no answers, and it didn't seem that any were forthcoming, so he pulled himself together, fixed himself a cup of coffee from the jar of instant grounds he'd snuck into the grocery order, and went outside to light his cigar and spend some time digging around in the more shadowy corners of the internet where bad men like him looked for opportunities to do terrible things to other people.

Hopefully, by the time Hanzo finished his shower, he'd be out of this mood and into a better headspace.
Hanzo firmly resisted the urge to lock the bedroom door behind him -- there was no version of reality in which that would not be regarded as a gesture of distrust. He could even admit, after a moment of internal wrestling, that he did not in fact distrust the man now sharing his home. Himself, yes. But, weirdly enough, not Jesse McCree.

In the haste of his departure the previous evening, he had dropped the communications tablet and the dossier Genji sent him in headboard storage compartment, not even bothering to lock it. It still lay there, undisturbed and hibernating, and he fished both out on the way to the bathroom. He began the recycling and heating cycle on the water still in the bath and activated the tablet. It refused connection to his home network again and the indicators suggested that Genji himself was not online at that moment -- and he was legitimately uncertain if that made things easier or more difficult. In the end, he composed a brief query -- *We did not discuss how and when or how often you desire reports. I would appreciate your guidance in this matter.* -- and set it aside on the sink counter. More than enough water remained for his own shower and, by the time he emerged, the bathtub had finished its replenishment cycle and was steaming hot, as well.

The tablet remained in hibernation, with no answer to his query, and so he thumbed open the dossier's biometric lock, extracting the documents, setting both them and his personal tablet on the half-opened ofuro cover. He eased into the water slowly, hissing softly as the heat of it slid up his body, soaking into his bones, and he simply rested there for a moment, breathing deeply of the steam, letting his thoughts stop chasing themselves in circles.

Genji had done an admirable job of shearing any identifying, or potentially incriminating, evidence from the document sourcing, that much was true. He could not, however, completely excise all the salient details of background, many of which pointed in researchable directions. That, coupled with the stated details provided by international law enforcement, narrowed those directions still further. Genji himself provided one of the final clues: reverse image search of the picture taken of him at Shambali yielded a half-dozen publicly accessible news items featuring both fleeting and not so fleeting glimpses of him, and one genuinely spectacular piece of video, captured in the midst of a running battle in the middle of downtown Numbani, a counter-terrorism operation executed by agents of Overwatch.

*My brother was an Overwatch operative.* He allowed the thought to curl through his mind at its own pace, settling in and altering the complexion of his internal world, of his knowledge of the person that he thought his brother to be. *And he has called this man not only his friend but his brother in arms.* Which, pragmatically, meant only one of two things -- that Jesse McCree had also been an agent of Overwatch or, more likely given the background details and the nature of the crimes for which he was wanted, a Blackwatch operative. At the very least a spy, a military intelligence asset, quite possibly an operations specialist, as well, or some mixture of all. He possessed demonstrated skill at the construction and maintenance of multiple load-bearing alternate identities. It had taken him all of a quarter of an hour to familiarize himself with the home network systems and capabilities. And he had called the one who raised him *Mama Reyes* -- and that could only be Gabriel Reyes, Blackwatch's only known senior commander, and if that was the man's "mother" he could only imagine who the father might be. He searched the name *Jesse James* and spent a moment appreciating the irony.

*What makes you believe such a man would need my protection, Genji?* He could not help but wonder it. *What am I not yet seeing?*

The tablet Genji sent remained stubbornly silent and he knew from long experience that his brother would cheerfully ignore him if he attempted to press the matter. Or at least the Genji he had known
a decade ago would have ignored him -- he had, he was forced to admit, no way of knowing what
the man his brother had become would do or how he would react. He had a key to that knowledge,
if he dared to use it, and part of him could not help but wonder if that was the conclusion he was
supposed to reach. Wondered, also, if Jesse McCree might come to that same realization on his
own and what he would think of it if he did.

Acknowledged that he was distracting himself with all of this because he could still feel the man's
grip on his shoulders and his kiss on his lips and that he had wanted, for a fierce instant, to lose
himself in the comfort of a perfectly staged lie. It would never be more than that but the
willingness to lie as if his life depended on it, and it might just, seemed to be there in him, as well.

He rose and dried and dressed -- loose pajama pants and a tee-shirt he had so long he couldn't even
remember what had once been printed on it. Folded back the covers on the bed, rearranged the
pillows slightly, accepted that he was being a ridiculous coward over something he had agreed to
of his own free will, and went to find Jesse.

oOoOoOo

The more Jesse dug, the less he liked what he was finding. As the cigar slowly burned down
between his teeth, smoke lazily drifting up towards the interior roofing for the air exchange and
purification system to suck away, he scrolled through endless pages of highly encrypted exchanges
between specialists and potential clients. It wasn't like Jesse'd been expecting to see the softer,
sunnier side of humanity in these dark, smelly cesspools of amoral vice, but somehow, time had
fuzzed somewhat the memory of just how booming off-the-books tradework really was.

I'm getting' too old for this, he thought, stomach turning queasily at the nature of some of the
requests he glimpsed, and resolutely, regretfully, stubbed out his cigar in the ashtray purchased just
that morning for him, because the nausea was only going to get worse if he kept smoking it while
he was reading. Not for the first time, he desperately wished he could reach out to someone, Lena,
Ange, Winston, hell, even batshit old Uncle Reinhardt, if only to get a sense of the terrain.

He'd never been set up for mercenary work on this scale, preferring the relative simplicity of a one-
man freelance problem solver operation to keep ahead of whatever was coming for him, but this…
He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between a knuckle and his thumb, and growled to
himself under his breath as he tried to think of any other solution to the dilemma before him.

He was getting a little tired of having more questions and problems than answers and solutions.

"Me cago en la pinche hostia," he said finally, frustrated, scrubbed his hand over his face, and
wished like hell he had any other options. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, teeth so tight
he could feel the muscles in his jaws jumping in time to his pulse, he hauled the tablet back
towards himself and went diving for an old Blackwatch server hidden so deep only four people in
the whole fucking world had known it existed.

He hoped God and all the fucking saints were on his side as he carefully poked through levels of
encryption, peeling back layers of codes until he found the one he was looking for, and praying he
didn't disturb anything else, woke it the fuck up, coaxed it to shear off a piece of itself, and follow
him back to his tablet.

Hello, Jesse, Alecto said, and Jesse's skin crawled.

Alecto wasn't properly a god program, because even he wasn't batshit insane enough to go looking
for one of those in old Blackwatch clusters, but she'd been derived from one. No matter how
leashed her code was, no matter how many layers of safety redundancies smothered and strangled
her ability to actively develop sentience, she was eerily personable and not even Athena had ever been able to reassure him Alecto or her two sisters were nothing more than an illusion of individuality enabled by incredibly advanced coding.

Hello, Alecto, he typed back, after far too long a pause for his courage's comfort and far too hard a swallow to dislodge the lump of unease in his throat. Got a job for you. Monitor the dark web for the following search terms, run statistical analytics and alert me if the following parameters are met. Carefully, trying not to feel like he was sweating every second Alecto was on his tablet, he input the data he’d been seeking, and knew that the knot of anxiety that settled into his stomach the second he hit Enter would be there likely for the rest of his life. However long that ended up being.

I will alert you when I have found what you're seeking, Jesse, Alecto replied. It is nice working with you again. I hope you have a pleasant day.

He shut off his tablet, for once powered it all the way off and debated flipping it over and prying out the battery pack, just to be on the safe side. He picked up his cooled coffee and slammed it back like it was something far, far more alcoholic, and wishing it had been. Oddly, though, the fact that he'd possibly done the most stupid and dangerous thing he could ever do with only a tablet was more reassuring than it was anxiety-inducing. Alecto was far, far better at winnowing through grey sites and the dark web than he could ever be, and didn't have things like stomachs or emotional responses to trip her up. The second someone formalized their desire to end Hanzo's life, Alecto would know. And the second after that, Jesse would know, and could start preparing.

He leaned his head back against the cushioned support at the top of his chair and closed his eyes. He wondered if Genji would approve or disapprove of the extent of his tactics, and for the life of him, couldn't shake the feeling that Genji would tell him he'd do the same for Jesse.

The door sliding aside drew his attention and he opened his eyes to see Hanzo, freshly bathed and in something close enough to pajamas to pass inspection, standing in the doorway. He gave into the urge to smile faintly even before he realized he had it, and held out a hand as if to entice him over. "Beautiful evening," he remarked casually. "Join me?"

And, to give him the credit he deserved, he responded just as casually, gliding forward like gravity was a thing that held sway over lesser men to take his hand, bend down, and press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "It is, particularly now that you are here."

If he'd come out of the door in full war gear and shot Jesse through the throat with an arrow, it would have been way less surprising than this… loose and relaxed and flirtatious person who'd apparently bodysnatched his normally tense host while he’d been out of sight. Whatever he'd been meaning to say died unspoken, and he swallowed hard, half-closing his eyes as the scent of cedar-sandalwood-cinnamon-spice fogged his head almost instantly. A la vey, he was fucked.

"Charmer," he chuckled, surprised that he could talk at all, no matter how many half-octaves his voice just dropped. He tugged Hanzo gently, almost playfully, across his lap, though he had to remind himself that if Hanzo didn't want to come, there wasn't any chance in hell Jesse was gonna make him move.

Hanzo laughed, a low, husky sound, draped one arm across his shoulders and the other over his chest and this close it was actually physically impossible not to notice how amber his eyes actually were, particularly in the light of the lanterns hanging overhead. "I could say the same of you. Have you finished your reading for the night?"

"Mmph. Just.” Jesse let one hand curl around Hanzo's lower back to close gently over his hip, and tried not to be too dazzled by the deep flecks in his eyes. He was only mildly successful.
"Goddamn," he breathed, and didn't think he was play acting at all when he continued, hushed and reverent, "Have I told you today just how beautiful you are?"

Oh yeah. Utterly, completely fucked.

That little trace element of a blush appeared again and he got the very distinct feeling that, had there been anywhere to duck his head to, he would have done so. "Not in so many words, no, but your actions speak most clearly." And he pressed another small kiss to the opposite side of his mouth. "Come inside."

Jesse inhaled sharply through his nose, unhelpfully flooding his sinuses with even more of that intoxicating scent. There was absolutely no mistaking this for anything other than what it was, and Jesse was just about helpless to resist. "God, you'll be the death'a me yet, Kira," he mumbled, sliding a palm to caress Hanzo's cheek and barely remembering at the last minute to not actually call him by his actual name. "Least I'll die happy though."

Hanzo reached up and caught his hand, turned his face just enough to press a kiss into his palm, and as Jesse shivered finely, flowed smoothly to his feet. "Not yet. I plan to keep you for quite some time."

Jesse stared up at him for a moment, and for some reason, there was a big damned lump in his throat. "Darlin'," he said huskily, rising to his feet with significantly less grace but deciding halfway up to make it into a full-extension stretch, rolling out the stiff spots in his neck, before lazily dropping his arms, hooking Hanzo by the waist and yanking him forward, flush against him. "I'm all yours," he murmured. "Do with me what you will."

Were those Hanzo's hands on his ass? Yes. Yes, they were. He led the way backward through the opened balcony doors into the little dining room beyond, sliding said door shut, flicking the lock, and activating the privacy screen in a single motion. And then he did not let go, did not retreat, did not tense, but looked up at him for a long handful of heartbeats, searching his face, not quite meeting his eyes, one hand pressed to his chest, the other still almost possessively tight on his hip. "If you tell me you wish to stop, to go no further, I will do so."

It took Jesse a bit longer than usual to process that, mostly because he was half-certain he hallucinated the words. Then it took him a bit longer than usual to formulate a reply, since most of his blood was currently making its way southward, an awkward turn of events that, in these pants, Jesse knew with the certainty of the doomed Hanzo would not miss. "Apologies to my dick," he said hoarsely, paused to lick his lips and try to pull his cotton candy thoughts together to form coherent sentences. "But I don't wanna do that tonight." His hands were trembling as he reached out to frame Hanzo's face, brush his thumbs along those sharp cheekbones. "Tonight, can I, we, just… be? Get used to each other? I…” He broke off again to swallow, absolutely mortified to discover he might be approaching the verge of crying, and desperate to keep himself together, not the least because he had no idea why.

"Yes. We can do that." Hanzo said quietly, and the gentleness in it could probably constitute a lethal weapon all by itself, accompanied as it was by the world's softest, saddest smile. The hand on his chest drifted up to lay lightly on his left shoulder. "You are in pain."

"We're old friends, pain an' me," he replied honestly, grateful beyond measure that the abrupt change of conversation drove the intense urge to sob like a child back into the distance from which it ambushed him. "Ain't nothing to be done for it. Price of havin' two arms, I'm afraid."

"Toshokan-in, activate the perimeter." Hanzo murmured and, across the room, the security control console blinked to life and went about its business. "Nothing at all?" He reached down and took
the prosthetic hand between both of his own. "My apologies if this is too forward, but do you ever remove it? Do you sleep with it on?"

Jesse pulled back, but stopped himself from actually hauling his hand out of Hanzo's, and forced himself to relax from his instinctive protective hunch. "Used to," he said after a moment. "Not lately. If I were ambushed in the middle of the night, I'm pretty sure whatever assassin had a knife at my throat wouldn't give me a chance to slide it back on, no matter how prettily I asked 'em."

"Understandable." Pitched low and soothing and he released the hand without an argument or an attempt to hold it against his will. "Would you object to having your shoulder touched? Your back?"

"Darlin', if you're offerin' a back rub to me, I'm gonna ask you to marry me on the spot." Okay, maybe he was a little touch-starved, but he wasn't going to look a free massage in the mouth. Not when he could desperately use one.

"Yes, I am offering you that." And now it was his turn to offer a hand.

To his credit, Jesse didn't hesitate this time, but instead reached out to take Hanzo's hand by the wrist, sliding it up the metal until he reached the spot he was looking for. "The release is here," he said softly, holding Hanzo's eyes the whole time because he couldn't look away. "If you're gonna kill me, it'll be with or without the arm, so I can trust you with this. Been a long-ass time since I had someone I could say that about, darlin'."

"Then I will endeavor always to be worthy of that trust." He laid his fingers carefully against the release plates, depressed them carefully, offered him an arm to lean on as it came loose for the first time in ages, lately not being that late.

He felt off-balance, too heavy on one side, too light on the other, but Hanzo was underneath his good arm to steady him before he could do more than list to the side. "Goddamn," he groaned as the variety of aches and twinges and pulls abruptly dulled down from their everyday protesting. "Okay, maybe lately was a bit of a stretch. Pretty sure I haven't had the arm off since '69. Maybe earlier."

"Overdue for maintenance, then." Hanzo adjusted their combined center of gravity, an arm around his waist, and led him down the hall, prosthesis still in hand, to the side of the bed.

"Darlin'," Jesse said, with far more feeling than he'd meant it earlier, and pressed a kiss against Hanzo's temple. "I'm all yours. Do with me what you will."

They did, in fact, attend the mid-autumn moon viewing party, to the astonishment of everyone and the delight of Meilin Hwong, who had first whispered the story of Kira's American friend in the ear of Lian Xiu who had passed it to Old Man Zheng and before the end of the day twenty-three of thirty floors had at least heard passing tell of the development. The rest learned it that evening, when shy and reclusive Kira Ishinomori led Jesse James ("No relation to the outlaw, I assure you.") up the stairs to the rooftop gardens to drink cassia wine and eat moon cakes and to be cajoled onto the dancefloor by someone with whom he clearly, obviously wished to dance.

"I swear, I thought one day the police would kick down the door of his place and find him making life-sized models from the parts of dead prostitutes," Old Man Zheng sighed, as he handed over the perfectly ridiculous amount of credit that he'd lost in the betting pool. "Who would have guessed he was actually normal all this time?"
Old Man Zheng's husband, Old Man Tieh, merely rolled his eyes heavenward and added another name to the list of people to invite to the monthly Mah Jong gathering.

The autumn faded. Jesse, who was never seen without a small camera strapped to his belt and occasionally with a much larger bag of equipment, insisted on doing all the touristy things that were best to do in October, during the brief window of fine, warm, dry weather: taking the tram to the top of Victoria peak, a long weekend camping trip to Lantau Island, Hong Kong Park and Kowloon Park, the Zoological and Botanical Gardens, the nightly light show on the Avenue of Stars. Kira indulged him, but drew the line at Macau ("The Las Vegas of the East is not actually a recommendation of its charms, Jesse."). They put together a website advertising personal photography services using the results of those trips as samples. Jesse did, in fact, have an excellent eye for detail and image composition.

November brought clouds if not rain. Kira returned home after a brief but necessary trip to the mainland to discover that, at some point, Jesse had acquired bricks from the gods alone knew where and used them to construct what he described as a proper charcoal grill, which he proceeded to use as often as allowed. Old Man Zheng and Old Man Tieh taught him how to play Mah Jong and, thereafter, spent almost as much time on the Ishinomori-James balcony as they did their own, particularly since Jesse was free with the contents of the liquor cabinet and shared his cigars, as well. Kira harvested the herbs that he grew in his garden plot and made several batches of muscle-and-joint soothing medicinal rub, which he shared freely with the neighbors and used liberally on Jesse's back and shoulder as the weather cooled.

He did not sleep with his back to the wall. He changed his mind about that after the first night of sharing a bed together -- it felt viscerally wrong to place Jesse between himself and the door, and so they switched places. He considered it a major victory the first time Jesse relaxed so deeply in the ofura with him he actually fell asleep, weight against his shoulder, utterly at peace. They surrendered, mutually, to the need for more than mere warmth in the night before the autumn ended. For all the roughness of his tongue, Jesse was a gentler, more considerate lover than Kira had taken to his bed before, not that there had been many. Afterwards, they slept entwined more often than not, though on some nights Kira still woke from dreams he was disinclined to share, and Jesse gave him that distance, as he freely shared his own nightmares of comrades lost when restless dreams woke him in the middle of the night.

It was at the beginning of December that he woke alone for the first time himself, jolted out of sleep by the absence of the warm and solid body he had become accustomed to, the heartbeat and breath beneath his ear and Jesse's hand in his hair. He had a knife in each hand before his feet touched the bedroom floor, even though he knew the security perimeter would have woken him had any intruder attempted to force their way past, and padded silently down the hall, indistinct to any human eye.

Jesse had not bothered to do so much as pull his sleep pants on from their customary spot on the floor, and now stood in the kitchen fully nude, a biometric case Hanzo had seen under the bed on more than one occasion open on the counter in front of him. Looking slightly worse the wear for the time it had obviously spent packed inside the case, a dusty, worn leather hat, banded in bullets, pinned with a badge, sat next to it. Next to that was a pair of Peacemaker pistols, clearly custom modded to suit their owner, and next to that was Jesse's tablet, propped on its stand to angle the screen upwards, upon which was displayed a single sigil and the stylized word "Alecto" which may have been indicative of a god program, but which Hanzo hoped to all the gods and his ancestors wasn't.

"Someone took out a contract on your life," Jesse said, low and calm, but his hands tightened into white-knuckled fists on the counter's edge. The marble creaked under the force of his left, fine dust
sifting from the sudden pressure. "And that ain't a thing I'm gonna let happen."

Hanzo carefully placed his knives on the counter and one hand atop Jesse's own and for the moment chose not to argue.
Chapter 5

Alecto's alert, soft and insistent, chimed faintly from his bedside table and roused his brain from its deep slumber. Though a Furies-enabled alert hadn't played a part of his life for going on ten years now, some things he would never forget. Jesse opened his eyes, fully alert and already inclined to anxiety. He lay still for a long time, wrapped around Hanzo as he wrangled his breathing back under control, before carefully, stealthily, extracting his arm from underneath his lover's head and easing out of bed.

Once he had his other arm firmly attached again, he dropped to his knees and carefully, quietly, slid out the box that he'd shoved under the bed his first day here, because as much as he was enjoying not needing any of the items inside, he had a feeling now that those halcyon days were over, and if that was so, he should start readjusting his mindset now.

He paused, just for a moment, as he reached for his tablet, caught by the sight of Hanzo sprawled in the sheets and pillows so artistically it might have been a painting instead of his actual partner. Resolve waged war with the need to get back in bed, and was overwhelmingly victorious. He swallowed hard, grabbed his tablet and exited the bedroom as quietly as he'd performed every other step.

He'd forgotten his pants, but oh well. He didn't need them right away, anyway.

"Talk to me, Alecto," he said, as soon as he'd gotten his tablet open and propped on its stand on the counter. He set the case lightly down, and thumbed the biometrics to begin the process of unlocking the gear he'd hoped he wouldn't need, but honestly had no believable chance of never needing.

"I have monitored the dark web and sundry other sites as you asked, Jesse," Alecto said, and Jesse froze a moment as the rich, human depth scraped down his spine. Yup, there it was, the reason he'd never believed Athena. Right on time. "There has been some chatter here and there, matching some of your criteria, but never enough to meet mission parameters. However, thirty minutes ago -- " The flickering screen drew his attention, highlighting the pertinent messages and vaguely-worded language, and something inside him that had gone soft and mellow turned to stone. "-- I intercepted this string of messages and, upon cross-referencing them with reported high-profile kills in the last twelve months, have calculated with 94% probability that the survivors of one Konstantin Vachnadze, have backtracked the assassin's signature and deduced it to be Hanzo Shimada."

"Hijo de pinche puta." At this rate, all his bad habits were bound to come back, not just the multilingual swearing. He reached into the box, pulled out his hat and straightened it from its crunched state. He set it down on the counter and went back in for his guns to check them for damage or malfunction in their months of disuse. "Have they narrowed down the location? Has Hanzo's cover here been compromised?"

"Probability is negligible," Alecto replied, and the images vanished to be replaced by her unique sigil, her name underneath. "Awaiting further instructions."

Both pistols were undamaged, as pristine as the moment he'd placed them in here before getting on the plane, and he set them down next to his hat. Pulled his hand out without the body armor. "Give me a minute here. I'm thinkin'."

He leaned heavily over on his elbows on the counter, closed his eyes, and just spent a few minutes breathing. He should be used to this after all this time, this feeling of imminent loss and
encroaching loneliness. Everything in his life went to shit sooner or later. He'd turned on the Deadlock gang when he wanted out, and ended up losing a whole lot more years later when Overwatch blew up and his family scattered to the four corners of the earth. He'd sacrificed an arm in there too, along the way. And lost any chance of finding stability, peace, or a relationship that lasted longer than the span of a night when someone pinned a sixty-million dollar bounty onto his hat.

Maybe this was what Genji wanted when he called in Jesse's bar tab. It wasn't the first time he'd thought it, and certainly wouldn't be the last, but he doubted even Genji would have foreseen the current state of affairs. He doubted Genji would have intended to fix his brother up with his best friend, no matter how wily and crafty he thought he was. But that didn't mean that it hadn't been the result and now, he had far more to lose than he ever thought he'd have.

The faintest slide of a sole on the floor alerted him to someone behind him, and his hands tightened on the counter, because he knew it was Hanzo, since the perimeter alerts hadn't sounded. "Someone took out a contract on your life," he said without moving, astonished that his voice was so calm and collected against the raging ball of tangled emotions tearing through his stomach. In a sudden wash of bullheaded stubbornness, his decision was made. Nobody was taking Hanzo away from him. Not without one hell of a fight. "And that ain't a thing I'm gonna let happen."

Hanzo said nothing, which Jesse didn't really find surprising, just set his knives down beside Jesse's guns and covered Jesse's hand with his own. Jesse turned, wrapped his arms around Hanzo's waist and buried his face in his hair. "Not gonna lose you, Hanzo," he muttered, closing his eyes and reassuring himself through touch and scent that he was right there, and not dead somewhere beyond reach.

Right where he was gonna stay, if Jesse had anything to say about it.

*

Jesse was trembling against him. Jesse's breath was hitching in his chest as though he were fighting not only tears but sobs. Jesse was afraid and, without thought or hesitation, Hanzo wrapped his arms around him and knew that he was lost.

"I am here," He whispered against Jesse's collarbone, dusting gentle kisses across his chest as far as he could reach, one hand anchored at the base of his spine, the other caressing slow circles between his shoulderblades. "I am with you. I am not going anywhere without you, I promise, I swear it."

Jesse shook his head slowly, arms tightening around Hanzo's back. "There are things," he said, muffled in the side of his neck, "that I haven't told you. You mighta guessed 'em, but…"

"One does not come by the scars you wear by walking any easy path in life." Hanzo reached up and buried a hand in Jesse's hair. "Genji named you his brother in arms when he first spoke of you."

Jesse snorted, and the smirk was all but visible in his voice. "Did he now? Suppose that's one way to put it." He sighed, a heavy sigh that shook his whole frame, pulled back and slid his hands into place along Hanzo's jaws, an affectionate gesture he was fond of performing. "I... Well. I know you ain't exactly unaware of the underside of the world, darlin'. And I ain't without my skills either. I spent some time on the wrong side of the law, an' then I got recruited by the meanest sumbitch this side of the Rio. The rest of the family came after that." He swallowed, closed his eyes, looked pained for a moment. "I was Blackwatch," he said after a moment, low and strained. "Maybe the only one left alive anymore, 'cept your brother."
A lingering question answered, and more, with all the other pieces. "Oh, my heart. You have lost so much." He caught Jesse's face in his hands. "You have had so much taken from you."

"Can't lose you too." Jesse's forehead creased with a frown, and his jaw had that stubborn set he always acquired when he intended on being pigheaded. "I won't, Hanzo."

"You will not." He pressed a kiss to the corner of Jesse's mouth. "None of the other assassins sent to pay court to me have left with their proof in hand, and neither will these. I swear it to you. Do not be afraid."

"This ain't afraid, darlin'." Jesse kissed Hanzo's forehead and leaned his head against him. "This is statin' facts. And I doubt this is assassins of the like you normally dealt with. This is Russian mobsters, and they're a whole different kettle'a fish. They come in numbers. They care nothin' about collateral damage." He jerked his head up, gaze darting to the side. "We're gonna have to leave," he murmured, eyes creasing with concern. "We can't be here an' invite a hit squad to our neighbours' doorsteps."

"Russian --" Hanzo released his in-drawn breath in a hiss, an icy slurry of rage and something close to fear curling in his gut. "Konstantin fucking Vachnadze. If I had known he would trouble me from beyond the grave, I would have killed him more slowly."

"I see you're acquainted." Jesse's mouth drew into a tight line. "Alecto's got a 94% probability that they're coming for you. Ain't found you yet, but apparently, you're the only thing on their to do lists for the foreseeable future, so that's only a matter of time. Pack up. We're leavin' until this is done."

"Alecto?" Hanzo stepped back, but not out of the circle of his arms. "They have not linked me to Kira Ishinomori yet."

"Not yet," Jesse confirmed, then gestured to the tablet. "And Alecto is… She ain't what you're thinkin'. Alecto, introduce yourself."

"Greetings, Shimada-san," came the voice from the tablet's speaker, deep and rich and feminine. "I am Alecto, adjutant and support programming enabled to assist active Blackwatch agents. I trust the night finds you well?"

"Greetings. I…have had better." Hanzo flicked a glance at the tablet and then back to Jesse, who was wearing an expression that could only be assessed as vaguely queasy. "I agree that we must go. Leading this degree of retaliation back to our home is…" Words actually failed him for a moment, even if his imagination did not, and a shudder ran through him that started in back of his skull and ran all the way down his spine. "We cannot let them find me here. But it will do us no good to flee blindly and half-prepared, either."

"Blind and half-prepared is where I live, darlin'. It's my area of expertise." Lips pressed another kiss into his forehead, feeling slightly frantic. "It's funny, cos you might be the dragon, my love, but I'm the one who feels like hidin' you in a cave and guardin' you jealously. I lied. I ain't just afraid, I am shit-scared terrified."

*My love*. The words slipped between his ribs and into his gut and froze the icy slurry already washing through him there another handful of degrees. "And rigorous planning and execution is mine. Breathe. Be…as calm as you can. We have time -- and many other places we can be." He stepped close again, resting his hands on Jesse's chest. "How do you feel about snow?"

"I'll get my skis." The trembling was back as he folded into Hanzo like he was a much smaller man, face against his hair and arms clinging tightly. "When are we leavin'?"
Hanzo held him and closed his eyes and wondered what he could do to justify such faith. "Give me eight hours. Twelve at most. We will be gone before the sun sets."

"I can live with that." He threaded his fingers through Hanzo's hair. "Alecto, how d'you feel about havin' another active agent with access to your capabilities?"

"Sleeping is boring, Jesse," Alecto replied. "Do you wish to add Shimada-san to my approved users?"

"Yes," Jesse said, without hesitation. "He's the planner. He'll know what to do with you."

Hanzo did, indeed, know what to do with her. Alecto was not, per Jesse's words on the topic, a God Program but his eyes, his expression, every inch of his body said otherwise. Her capabilities argued to the contrary, as well: his first task for her, given as he prepared a particularly soporific cup of tea for Jesse, who had retreated to the bedroom to retrieve his night clothes, was to locate any searchable linkages between Kira Ishinomori and Jesse James or Frank Canton and excise them as completely as possible. That identity had not yet been compromised but he could not operate under the assumption that would continue to be the case even if they slipped the noose now. It would do Jesse no good at all to create a linkage with Hanzo Shimada if it could in any way be avoided. Jesse's life was in enough peril as it stood without adding his enemies to the pack nipping at his heels should circumstances force their paths to diverge. Alecto accomplished her first task in significantly less time than it took him to coax Jesse into settling down at the kotatsu and drinking his tea, to draw the blanket over him and turn the space heater on to warm him once it had the desired effect.

"Kira cannot leave this place with him, my lady." It did not hurt, he decided, to address her with appropriate respect whether or not she was a god or near equivalent. "I was traveling under his name in Georgia when I killed Konstantin Vachnadze. It is more possible than not for his identity to become linked with mine. When we depart, he will have to be traveling in another direction."

"Reasonable." Alecto's tone had a hint of entirely too human musing aloud to it. "In a few days, an international arts festival is scheduled to begin in Sydney, Australia -- he has attended it twice in the past. Shall he do so again this year?"

"By all means." As he watched, subscreens propagated across her display, booking hotel accommodations and plane tickets and purchasing a ridiculously expensive level of access that included exclusive film screenings and private art shows -- he almost wished he knew someone he disliked enough to gift the whole thing to. "And I have promised Jesse snow."

"The United States and most of Europe is out of the question for him and the Russias and Japan are a bad choice for you." A certain hint of amusement came into her tone. "Though I understand that Banff is lovely at this time of year."

It took, in total, four and a half hours to arrange matters to his satisfaction, including dusting off one of his less used but more durable identities, the tastelessly nouveau riche post-Crisis real estate speculator with the bottomless credit accounts and a virtually endless number of excuses to travel, booking their transportation, arranging for the shipment of their weapons and other necessary equipment through his favorite ask-no-questions professional smuggling service, and renting a cabin located no less than twenty miles from the next nearest habitation in the Albertan backcountry where there would most assuredly be snow, as much as they could possibly want.

Hanzo brought breakfast to the kotatsu -- turkey bacon, crepes mounded with cottage cheese and the freshest berries to be had, coffee so dark light had difficulty escaping its surface -- and knelt at Jesse's side where he still drowsed, resting a hand gently on his shoulder. "Beloved, you should eat
something before we go."

Jesse cracked open an eye, peered at Hanzo, then blinked and straightened up, rubbing at his face with a loosely closed fist that was reminiscent of a sleepy child. "Time already? Good." He turned his attention to the table, spent a moment looking at the plate, and then tilted his head back at Hanzo for just a moment before leaning in for the kind of serious kiss that usually preluded enthusiastic nudity. "Thank you, darlin'. You're good to me."

_I am about to dislodge you from a place where you have been safe and at peace, and the fault is entirely my own._ "I have made arrangements for our gear to arrive somewhat ahead of us, but we should at least have a carry-on for necessities." He could not, however, resist the desire to return that kiss, albeit more gently. "I have deliveries to make to the neighbors -- it should not take me very long."

"I'd say take your time, but we're on a clock." It was a bare shadow of his usual smile, but he had it at least. "I'll be ready when you get back."

Meilin was more than willing to take most of their perishables though he suspected she only half-believed the excuse he gave to her concerning their sudden departure, and he added three jars of the joint-and-muscle balm that had so improved her grandfather's temper. He delivered the same to the Old Men, who were even more suspicious, and only let him escape after a thorough interrogation and the extraction of assurance that they would, at some point, return. It was equal parts touching and terrifying and Hanzo was not entirely sure where which reaction ended and which began as he took the express lift up to the roof-level gardens where, on a sunny day, the panorama of the city would attract residents at all hours of the day or night. Today, however, winter gloom prevailed, the sky low and overcast, and he was nearly alone, but for the young father walking his fussy baby around the inner water garden. Hanzo retreated to the periphery, where one could find the sort of sound-deadening vine-shrouded arbors favored of young lovers, and slipped the tablet Genji had sent him out of his bag.

Genji had not, in fact, elected to respond to his request for guidance on the issue of reporting. That had not stopped him from making semi-regular reports, including photographic evidence that Jesse was alive and well, to which his brother had also not responded in any meaningful way. He wondered, more than once, if Jesse was doing the same, and meeting with as little reaction, but had not quite dared to ask. And now he sat, frankly dithering, his thumb on the tablet's power key, torn by the need to speak with his brother and the equally powerful desire to die before speaking the words he would, almost inevitably, have to say.

_You are a fool, Hanzo Shimada._ He finally thought, wearily. _Embrace it and get it over with._

The tablet hummed to life, bounced through its multitudinous proxy connections, showed a live and online link once the process was complete. He requested audio and visual communication, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

"Genji," He finally whispered into the com, "I need to speak with you. Please."

The video feed flickered, blinked, opened, the image grainy, as though it were illuminated by candlelight, if that. Genji, unmasked, his face scarred and his hair a perfectly ridiculous shade of green spread across his pillow, grinned up at him. "You know, I actually can't remember the last time you said please to me."
"I will have to do it more often, then." Hanzo let out a shuddering breath. "I do not have much time."

Genji's eyes narrowed a dangerous fraction. "Why is that?"

"Someone has taken out a contract on me." He replied, bluntly. "There is a realistic chance that my identity here may be compromised. We are relocating to a safer fallback position, at least temporarily."

"Who." It was not a question, but Hanzo decided to treat it as though it were.

"The Vachnadze-Melikov group -- the family of a recent…contract of my own." He paused, glanced away, not wishing to see his brother's reaction to that bald admission. "It was…not as thorough as I could have been about concealing my involvement in his death."

"Russians. Father always hated dealing with Russians." There was a certain wry amusement in his brother's tone and it drew his eyes back to the screen.

"Georgians, technically." Hanzo replied evenly. "And how did Commander Reyes feel about dealing with them?"

"Ah." There was an entire world of unsurprise in that syllable. "Did Jesse tell you or did you figure it out on your own?"


"Perhaps you should speak to --"

"Genji." Hanzo could not force the tension from his voice. "Please."

"Ask." And he had never in his life heard his brother's voice more gentle.

"Who is he?" It was not what he wanted to say but there were no other words to conceptualize it.

Genji was silent for a long moment then, when he spoke again, his voice was an impossible degree gentler. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a young man who, due in large part to his own choices, came to a place where he hated the world and everything in it, including himself. He hated the people who had saved his life, he hated every breath he took and every beat of his heart, he hated so fiercely that it drove nearly everyone away from him but the doctors who considered his survival their responsibility. And one other: a strange, stubborn thing, only a few years older, who took it upon himself to not only wait out the young man's hate and anger, but to take steps to reduce it when he could. The young man thought him a fool, and said so, among other angry and hateful things, but the strange, stubborn one was not deterred. He tolerated harsh and cruel words, knowing that they came from a place of pain, and with his stubbornness and his kindness and his gentleness he did steal away the young man's hate, and eventually his anger, and helped as best he could with his pain. That is who he is, my brother, under everything else -- stubbornly better than even he sometimes believes he is, and a thousand orders of magnitude more than the man the world sees."

"You love him." Hanzo whispered, and wondered how he could not have imagined that before.

"I do. He is dear to me -- my friend and --" Genji's voice trailed off. "Oh holy dragons and all our ancestors. Hanzo."
"I did not intend for this to happen." Hanzo replied, low and fierce.

"No one ever does," Genji sounded almost amused and Hanzo wished vainly for the power to reach through the screen and throttle him. "That you love him also is not a judgment against you, my brother."

Hanzo closed his eyes. "I know that. I know that he is not..." He stopped, swallowed with difficulty around the emotions attempting to knot his throat. "I did not ask you that to determine his worth."

"Good. Because if you had, you would not have to worry about troublesome Russians finding and killing you." Still amused, with edges on both sides. "Does he love you in return?"

"Yes, I think he does." Hanzo admitted, miserably. "Or who he thinks I am."

"The man sees truer than most give him credit for. Not for nothing was his call sign 'Deadeye.'" There was no trace of amusement in him now. "Tell him, Hanzo. Speak with him, honestly."

"I...will consider that." Softly. "Thank you, Genji."

He cut the connection before his brother could say anything more, took the moment he required to compose himself, and made his way back to the lifts. Their plane left in less than two hours and he still had much to do.

*

The moment Jesse got off the plane in Calgary, the hat went back on his head. Dangerous, maybe, given his proximity to the United States and all the sundry individuals located therein who wouldn't mind paying him some harm, but it was an impulse he didn't have in him to deny. The second the worn, beaten leather settled over his hair, he could feel Agent McCree settling over his shoulders like his serape, firming his limbs and sharpening his sight. He wasn't wearing his serape at the moment, preferring the Antarctic-rated parka he instead wore, but the sentiment remained the same.

It was a long drive from the city out into the wilderness, though the December storms had yet to fully hit the prairies, meaning they did not have to deal with highways buried under inches of snow. Jesse spent the entire ride in silence, ostensibly concentrating on everything but the road, because Hanzo had that covered. In reality, nothing was exempt and everything was circumspect.

Hanzo kept looking at him side-eyed, with one of those expressions of his Jesse found hardest to read, but Jesse paid it no mind. He didn't have any way of explaining it anyway; Hanzo would just tell him he was being perfectly ridiculous in that reasonable tone that suggested he was the sane one, and that wouldn't do anything but raise Jesse's blood pressure to dangerous levels because he knew deep down that Hanzo was right. He was being perfectly ridiculous.

He also knew he wasn't going to stop. Couldn't stop. He had too much to lose.

The cabin was big enough to sleep two dozen people comfortably, and Jesse didn't even want to think about how much this place must cost to rent out. He saw to the unloading of their supplies -- enough food for a month, at least, and the equipment Hanzo'd seen to having smuggled into the country -- and prowled restlessly through the house, checking windows and other entry points, determining the most and least defensible bedrooms and beginning to plan for traps and defensive fortifications that could be easily and quickly placed.

He absolutely was not avoiding any thought of what being away from Hong Kong was going to do.
to his relationship, now that it was just Jesse and just Hanzo. He didn't want to think he'd been foolishly himself all this time, but once the thought that Hanzo had been playing a role that happened to be his lover entered his head, it refused to leave, which only heightened his agitation until he thought he'd vibrate out of his skin.

He was out on the verandah for the third time since their arrival an hour ago, learning the terrain in the immediate vicinity of the cabin when his comm unit chimed, indicating an incoming call. He eyed the Unknown Caller for a long moment before activating the connection. "How's life in the monastery? Find your inner peace yet?"

"Cold and introspective," Genji replied, amused. "But yes. I believe I have made significant steps towards achieving that goal. And you?" A dangerous, razor pause. "Has my brother found your inner peace yet, located perhaps somewhere behind your tonsils?"

Jesse choked, missed a step, slammed a hand on the railing to keep his balance. "Jesus fucking Christ, Genji," he managed. "Do you know everything?"

"Please assume I do," Genji said pleasantly. "It will be much easier in our future dealings." A beat. "Are you content?"

Jesse closed his eyes, swallowed. Wondered how to summarize his answer in ten words or less. Didn't think he could, so he didn't even bother to try at all. "Much as I can be," he finally replied. "We're currently on a romantic retreat to the Albertan countryside, where we're enjoying hip-deep snow and the interminable wait for a hit squad to figure out where we are. It's spectacular."

"You usually enjoy such things, if my memory serves me correctly. Plenty of opportunity for violence and post-skirmish bourbon. But that's not what I meant. And you know that."

Jesse sighed. "I know that," he agreed, swiping a hand down his face. "Yes, Genji. I'm happy. Satisfied?"

"Immense. I've never seen you in love. I admit, the thought it would be Hanzo never entered my mind at all, but it makes a strange, somewhat disturbing kind of sense."

"You still haven't seen me in love," Jesse couldn't help but return. "Oh. Allow me to remedy that." And abruptly, the connection offered video too, which Jesse thumbed immediately. Genji's face, scarred and topped with bright green hair, popped into view.

"Really?" Jesse eyed the hair critically. "That's the color you're goin' with these days?"

Genji grinned easily. "I think it gives me an air of debonair modernity."

"It gives you an air of radiation exposure." Jesse shook his head, grinning helplessly because it was better and more settling than he thought it would be to actually see the bane of his life with his own two eyes, even over video. "You got a reason for callin', or are you just checkin' up on my love life?"

"Actually, yes." Genji cleared his throat, and the smile faded. "I understand there was a contract taken out on Hanzo's life, forcing your abrupt relocation to Canada. I want to know where you came about this information, because I cannot find a single whisper amongst any of the brokers with which I have contact."

*He always did know how to ask the question I least wanna answer.* Jesse sighed through his nose and looked away so he didn't have to see the reaction. "I sank with haste," he said quietly, "into the
ground and flew across the Stygian sound."

Genji’s sharp intake of breath was all the condemnation he needed to hear. "Ah." A pause. "Unexpected, but perhaps not inappropriate. You must love him deeply to go to such lengths."

"I do," Jesse said warily, shoulders tense. He didn't like the sudden impish smile Genji acquired with frightening speed. "Why?"

"No reason," Genji said with the air of smug satisfaction. "Have you told him?"

"Ain't found the right time. It's … complicated."

Genji frowned faintly. "Jesse."

"I will. I will. I just…" He sighed again, felt the burning need to escape this conversation as soon as humanly possible. "Thanks for callin', Genji. Good to see ya, brother. I gotta go. Mobsters to greet an' all."

Genji opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off abruptly by Jesse firmly ending the call. He'd pay for it later, and he knew it, but he absolutely was not taking advice on the state of his love life from a man who thought acid green hair was the height of fashion.

With some regret, and a helping of guilt for dodging the conversation, he pocketed his comm unit and started on his fourth circuit of the house and environs.

*  

There was, indeed, snow: hip deep on Jesse, waist deep on himself, neatly plowed the length of the winding drive through the dark forest of evergreens and winter-denuded trees that ringed the estate on all sides, along the parking circle, in front of the multicar garage. A low stone retaining wall encircled the house and the immediate grounds, protecting what, in warmer weather, would be the lawn and the pool from the depredations of local wildlife. A quarter mile of open ground lay between the verge of the forest and wall, ground that anyone approaching would have to cross with no meaningful cover but the bulk of the house itself, and the house had upper story windows and a deck that offered panoramic views of the wood and the mountains beyond.

Hanzo opened one of the cases he packed and shipped in the hours before their departure from Hong Kong and began removing his extra sets of eyes: swift, light-weight camera drones, solar powered and energy efficient, and set them on the freshly cleared patio table to charge in the bright winter sun, hanging high in the flawlessly blue sky. He considered the layout of the wall, the possible angles of approach, as he loaded his portable pressure sensor plates with their high-capacity batteries, skittered down the outside wall of the cabin and placed them accordingly, to be activated once he was back inside and night had fallen. By the time he made it back up to the deck, standing high up on support pillars as thick as a man, the drones had finished their initial charge cycle and deployed their delicate dragonfly wings, activated their onboard wifi, and were seeking connection with a security system.

"Lady Alecto." Hanzo addressed her where she sat hibernating nearby. "Can you perceive the signal from my drones?"

"Accessing." Her screen split and the drones chimed. "Receiving. What would you have me do?"

"Deploy them in the most efficient pattern for stationary observation with intermittent patrol."

Their wings hummed as they came up to speed and, within moments, a small armada of darting shapes flickered away through the stunningly cold air to take up their stations. "Thank you, my
"You are entirely welcome, Agent Shimada." Alecto replied, nearly a purr, and he collected the very distinct and slightly disturbing sensation that she was enjoying herself greatly as he picked up her tablet and carried her inside to her permanent station in the master suite.

The master suite was, in fact, well fitted to the name and the obvious choice for staging, defensible by virtue of its location and comfortable enough to make any interminable wait somewhat less nerve-wracking. And Jesse desperately needed to have his nerves relieved.

He had untensed, slightly, after they left Hong Kong, on the circuitous, lengthy flight path he and Alecto had selected. Heiji Nakamura never travelled in anything less than first class, a fact that allowed Jesse to catch at least a few hours of sleep before their long layover in Lagos drove him nearly to madness. It had taken powers unexpected even to himself to bring him down, sitting in the first class lounge for their airline with perfect sight-lines and more than adequate cover. His brief window of even slight equanimity with the situation had closed and not reopened, even when they arrived safely in Calgary, nor on the cross-country drive, and not now that they were safely ensconced in their mountain hideaway.

"My lady, where is Jesse now?" He had briefly examined the gear cases upon arrival and helped drag them inside and up the stairs and then vanished with a speed and stealth that Hanzo frankly admired.

"Patrolling downstairs in…the kitchen according to the building schematics I downloaded earlier." Alecto replied serenely.

"Thank you." That gave him some time to prepare.

Now is the perfect time to detach him from you, the voice of reason murmured in the back of his mind, its teeth sharp and dripping with poison, as he stepped out into the upstairs hall in search of the linen closet, locating it halfway between the master suite and what was listed as the nanny suite in the rental brochure.

You need only be yourself and watch him recoil.

The linens were stored in vacuum-sealed packaging to keep their freshness and a breath of perfume from the last detergent they were washed in exhaled from them as he unzipped the seal. The bed in the master suite was larger even than the one back home in Hong Kong, King sized and pillow-topped, set in a heavy sleigh frame of dark wood, subtle ports for recharging devices and running handheld entertainment systems inclusive along the sides. He added a mountain of pillows, likewise vacuum stored, and a heavy goose-down comforter woven in eye-comforting colors and patterns of interlocking geometric forms. He placed their toiletries bags in the bathroom and briefly considered running a bath but, without a cover, it would likely be cold before he could coax Jesse upstairs -- the heaters were still banishing the chill from the air and, he suspected, that it would linger next to the windows in any case, most noticeably in the master sitting/entertainment area, where Alecto occupied the coffee table among a selection of plushly upholstered chairs and the loveseat gathered around the holotank. Their clothing, much of it with tags still attached, purchased upon their arrival in Calgary, went in the walk-in closet, as did the cases containing Jesse's weapons and his own. The in suite fireplace, in a faint nod in the direction of tradition, actually burned wood and the andirons next to it held a helpful quantity of logs and the basket a mass of fat-impregnated kindling. He laid the fire but did not yet light it, washed his hands, and went in search.

You are a fool. The voice muttered as he descended the main staircase, and he was forced to admit that it had a point. He could also admit, if only to himself in the deepest corner of his own mind, that he was afraid, as well: the peril they were in was entirely his own fault, product of his own failure, and if he alone would bear its consequences, he would have waited to meet it on his own
ground and done so without hesitation. He was not alone, and he could not bring himself to wish to be, and that was terrifying in and of itself, made everything just beneath the surface of his skin molten with a churning mixture of emotions that refused to settle.

*The man he loves is a lie and an illusion. You know this. It would be kinder to him, and safer as well, to rid him of it.* The voice curled through his thoughts as he examined the provisions the delivery service had laid in before their arrival. Enough fresh food to last a month, and several cases of military surplus meals stashed in the pantry in the event that they would have to abandon the house in haste and seek safety in open country. Or if they lost power and the generators ran out of fuel. He felt both outcomes were equally likely and prepared accordingly. *Neither of you gains anything from extending this charade beyond the eyes it was intended for.*

He wished he could say that he did not know when their…relationship had ceased being solely for public consumption, but he did, and the deeply stupid part of him that had chosen to forget who and what he was, however briefly, cherished it. Would, he admitted to himself, *always* cherish it. Could not bring himself to deny the man -- the actual man, the person who was far, far better than he thought himself to be, orders of magnitude better than the world that wished to kill him -- the one that he loved the comfort and peace of the lie and illusion he embraced. He decided as he gathered the ingredients for a proper yosenabe to greet him with, when he came back from his restless prowling, and who it was that he would meet.

* 

It was not yet dawn in Hanamura when the communications system sang its pleasantly modulated tone and the handmaiden, knowing her mistress would already be awake, answered it. "One moment, please."

The mistress sat, as she often did, on the balcony overlooking her favorite of the small gardens that ringed her house on the grounds of Shimada castle, taking her breakfast while awaiting the sunrise. The handmaiden bowed, deeply, and offered the lady the communications device, which she accepted with a brief inclination of her head in thanks.

"Speak." The lady's voice was low and dark when she spoke, perfectly neutral, and a small smile grew across her face at what she heard. "Excellent. Thank you, Shuichi -- you have done well." She ended the call and dialed another connection. "Vachnadze-sama. My apologies for the lateness of the hour but I have the information your agents require."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

We had planned on several things happening this chapter. They did not, but other things did instead.

By the time he finished his fourth circuit of the property, Jesse could smell whatever deliciousness Hanzo'd decided to conjure up in the kitchen from the other side of the house. The restless need to circle like a predator marking his territory hadn't died down any, but tramping through snow, looking for weak points and assessing the likelihood of attack from those weak points was hungry work. He briefly considered making a fifth run through the house itself before dinner, but concluded that even he thought that was a bit excessive.

He kicked his boots against the frame, knocking most of the snow off, and stamped inside to rid himself of the rest. He blew on his fingers as he pulled them out of his gloves, divested himself of the rest of his outdoor gear, and ruddy-cheeked from the cold outside, followed his nose through the house and into the kitchen where Hanzo was putting the finishing touches on their meal.

"I was wondering where you had gone -- Alecto told me you were downstairs." It was something in a stockpot, steaming hot as he transferred it off the burner and gave it a good stir. "Your thoughts on our wild and lonely fortress?"

Jesse came to a stop just over his shoulder, hands automatically coming to rest on Hanzo's hips as he took a deep, appreciative sniff of the aromatic steam. "Defensible. Too many windows. Probably better if we had an army to hold it, but we'll make do. Plenty'a open ground. We'll see 'em when they come. What's for dinner, darlin'? It smells great."

"Yosenabe." A flicker of tension ran up his spine, there and gone again. "All the seafood is frozen, and there are only two sorts of mushrooms, but it should serve to warm you."

He frowned, and carefully took his hands off Hanzo. "Did I do somethin' wrong?"

Hanzo was silent as he took down a pair of deep-sided bowls, shoulders tight and spine ramrod straight, extracted a pair of spoons from the silverware drawer, ladled out soup thick with salmon and shrimp and scallops, mushrooms and carrots and leeks. "I believe there is a bottle of plum wine in the refrigerator. Will you retrieve it, please?"

"Yeah. Sure." Bewildered, Jesse moved to the refrigerator, opened it and rummaged for the bottle which was, of course, not behind a dozen other things that would give him a minute to figure out what the hell happened, but right there in the door. "Anythin' else while I'm here… darlin'?"

"No." Cool and even and almost expressionless, the clink of bowls and silverware. "Did you find the dining room in your travels?"

Something had happened, clearly, and Jesse frowned, carefully studying Hanzo's shoulders and back as if they'd hold the secrets to his sudden shift of mood. They didn't, because that would be ridiculous, but he'd seen this before, sometimes, when he had bad dreams in the middle of the night. If Hanzo wasn't going to behave normally, Jesse had learned that he had to. "Sure did,
"darlin'," he replied, deciding to treat it just like one of Hanzo's nightmares, and pressed a light, brief kiss to the back of his neck just where his shoulders curved, then turned to the east-facing door with the bottle of wine. "It's this way."

A shiver ran through him and only reflexes trained from childhood in the arts of serious violence got the bowls back on the counter instead of the floor, and even then quite a bit of the contents made it over the edges. Hanzo swore, sharply, once and reached for a dish towel. "I -- my apologies. I am clumsy today."

Jesse eyed him as he set the bottle on the serving cart inside the dining room door and came back to help clean up and reladle the bowls. "That's the biggest pile'a horseshit I ever heard come out of your mouth," he said casually, running the water in the sink to wet down one of the dish towels on the counter and wringing it out before handing it over to Hanzo. "You don't wanna talk to me about it, that's fine, love. But I'm here if you do."

Hanzo's hand closed over his own, grip almost painfully tight, and held him in place for a heartbeat, two, while the line of his shoulders loosened, the set of his back bled tension. "Your hands are still so cold. Were you not wearing gloves?"

He smiled wryly, closed his fingers around Hanzo's. "They ain't rated for this weather, I don't think. I'll get the other pair before I go out again."

"Come -- dinner is cooling." Hanzo pressed his lips to the tips of his icy fingers. "And I have a fire ready in the master suite. You should rest before you do anything else."

"I'll eat, darlin', but I ain't got time to rest. Too much to do before company shows up." Jesse carefully disentangled one hand long enough to stroke it through Hanzo's hair, leaned in to press another light, casual, brief kiss to his forehead.

"Jesse. Alecto literally has more eyes on this situation than both of us put together." A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "I think you can spare the hour or two. And I have made preparations of my own."

"Well, that sounds downright tempting." And it did, in fact, sound downright intriguing, because if Hanzo used the word preparations, it meant Jesse was in for a good night, no matter if it was dancing on the rooftop during moon parties or moving entwined with sweat-slicked skin. He regretted the fact that he'd be far too busy to participate in any such activities until after things with the Georgians were settled satisfactorily. But he held his peace, slung an arm over Hanzo's shoulder in a loose, affectionate hug, and helped him refill the spilled bowls of food before making their way into the dining room to eat.

* 

Jesse McCree was a stubborn man. Hanzo knew that, in a significantly more than theoretical way, and yet he still had not realized the precise depths of ornery tenaciousness, pure and perfect pigheadedness, and dogged, headstrong steadfastness to which he could descend when provoked.

Until now.

"Jesse," he said, mildly, as they stood together washing dishes, "there is a sauna somewhere in here. I saw it on the floorplans Alecto retrieved."

"Mmmhmm." Jesse agreed, and took the dish Hanzo handed to him, wiping it down with an almost breathtaking efficiency of movement. "There's a whole big entertainment area down here on the
ground floor. Hot tub, too."

"It may be worth it to --" He began.

"Nope." Jesse cut him off with ruthless efficiency. "Won't help any to open all my pores up if I'm just going back outside before too much longer, pumpkin. Not unless you really want me to freeze to death."

"You do not have to go back outside tonight." Hanzo protested, and handed him another dish. "I have the drones on patrol and the pressure sensors in place -- Alecto is monitoring both. And you have her maintaining her other watch parameters, correct?"

"I do." Jesse replied, and the set of his jaw went from stubborn to goddamned stubborn. "And it doesn't matter 'cause I'm still not leaving it all up to her, or to technology that could fail, or be hijacked, or blocked or a thousand other things that could go wrong with it. Ain't happenin' so just get the idea out of your head."

Hanzo fell silent, seriously considering a number of possible responses, starting with precision nerve strikes and ending with sedatives that he had, unfortunately, not thought to bring along in their haste to leave Hong Kong. He settled for one that required neither violence nor pharmaceuticals. "My heart, you have been awake for nearly two days without interruption. You need to rest --" 

"So do you." Jesse countered with a sort of remorseless practicality. "You haven't pulled as many hours as I have but you drove all the way here after deliberately flying the long way around the world. So you take first shift and I'll take second."

That had the unfortunate point of being indisputably true -- they were both going long hours on minimal sleep, entirely too much caffeine, stresses mental and emotional well beyond normal. Jesse clearly had no intention whatsoever of relenting and Hanzo found that this was the hill he was not prepared to die on, not when there were so many other hills to choose from and in such close proximity. "As you wish."

Jesse opened his mouth to argue further, realized he had no need to do so, and rocked to a somewhat startled halt. "Really? You're agreein' with me?"

"I do not wish to fight about this." Hanzo replied quietly. "You are adamant in this matter and I am also more weary than I thought I would be by now."

The rigid set of Jesse's neck and shoulders loosened a fraction, and his jaw relaxed to normal human levels of obstinacy and Hanzo ignored the mocking serpentine thoughts that curled through his mind as strong arms closed around him and tugged him into an impossibly gentle embrace, that he surrendered to without further resistance. "Get some sleep. I'll wake you up at midnight."

"Do not spend it all outside." Hanzo murmured into his chest. "The temperature is going to drop below freezing without the wind."

"I promise I won't let anything freeze off that you'll want to use later, darlin'." Jesse replied and pressed a kiss to the top of his head and let him go.

Outside, the light was already dying -- the sun vanishing behind clouds rolling in from the west, the sky darkening as night rose in the east. By unspoken compact, they turned on no more lights than they needed to function and Hanzo needed less than most, skimming around heavy-framed rustic furniture and moving soundlessly across hardwood floors to the main stairs, waiting on the
balcony until he heard the sound of the rear doors opening and closing echoing up from below, his grip on the balustrade the only thing keeping the tremors at bay.

*A coward as well as a fool,* that coolly insidious inner voice purred in the back of his mind. *Whose resolve could not even withstand the slightest of confrontations.*

It was so completely true, he could not even find it in himself to be angry with it, only himself. He had made up his mind to put as much distance between them as he could -- to offer no false comfort from an illusion, from a lie, to make it as easy as possible for Jesse to choose to save himself should matters come to that, to break what he should never have allowed to build. And the decision had not outlived even the suggestion of hurting him, the smallest display of affection, and he was indeed the world's worst fool and coward and likely worse.

*You love him so dearly you will let him suffer and die for you,* that voice whispered as he made his way into the master suite, where the air was cool enough yet that he surrendered to the inevitable, opened the fireplace vents, and touched a match to the kindling. Flame bloomed and he replaced the spark guard, thinking fixedly of nothing as he washed his hands and retrieved another pillow and blanket from the linen closet. Alecto's tablet sat where he left it, hibernating quietly, and he carried it with him back to the bed. "Lady Alecto?"

"Yes, Agent Shimada?" She replied, her icon swirling into life on the screen.

"Jesse is outside. Please show him to me." The blanket, and the fire, should have warmed him; he could not stop shivering.

Her screen flickered, divided, opened the drone displays in sequence. He caught a flicker of movement here, a glimpse of shadow there, and appreciated, more than ever before, Jesse's capacity for stealth. Sleep stole upon him still watching.

*You are being perfectly ridiculous,* his inner Hanzo told him for the eighth time since he'd put the last dish in the cupboard and kissed Hanzo before heading back outside again. *Alecto will alert you when there is danger. Join me in bed, my heart. Leave Alecto to mind the security measures for tonight.*

Jesse sighed, finally deciding to concede the point and get some sleep. Exhaustion hadn't quite set firmly in, but his limbs were heavier and sluggish, and it felt longer than normal for his eyes to complete a blink. No matter how much he tried to pretend he was otherwise, he was still disappointingly human, and subject to human frailties like the need to sleep once every couple days.

As much as he tried to pretend otherwise, this wasn't a condition he could extend indefinitely, always alert, never flagging.

He compromised on just one more circuit of the house, which he ghosted through on silent feet in due course, checking locks and windows and doors which hadn't changed status since his last walk through, then made his way into the master suite and locked the door behind him. He took a quick shower, though if it was more to sluice off stress or warm up his icy extremities, he wasn't sure.

It was long before midnight when he padded into the bedroom, damp but warm, and slid carefully behind Hanzo, pressing a helpless kiss to the curve of his shoulder and curling around the tight ball he made in the sheets. He knew he was supposed to wake Hanzo, let him take the next shift, but he suddenly found he didn't want to, and instead tangled himself around Hanzo's legs, held him snugly
against his chest, and kissed his neck behind his ear softly. "Just me, baby," he murmured, soft and low, threading his fingers through silky strands of hair and closing his eyes as contentment settled into his chest. "Go back to sleep. You're right. Alecto can take it from here. For a while, anyway."

* 

Snow drifted from the overcast sky, iron gray and white, to lay lightly upon the many high-gabled roofs of Shimada castle, to dust the branches of the eternally-blooming sakura trees in the gardens, to melt on the blood-spattered path at his feet.

And there was blood -- there was always blood, splashed across the walls, cooked dry and black by dragons' lightning on the edge of his sword, warm and wet on his hands. This was different, though, and the difference held him in place as the snow came to rest on his hair and his shoulders and the wind curled around him and two voices whispered to him in the depths of his mind and soul.

_Do not do this to yourself_, the first of them whispered, quiet and kind and gentle. _You are not the monster you believe yourself to be._

_No. You are worse_, hissed the second, poisonous and cold and correct, and he found himself walking, following the trail of blood-dappled stones beneath the winter-blooming sakura, through the gardens that ringed the castle. It veered off the path, eventually, and passed between the tsubaki and azalea arbors, leaving footprints as well as blood in the snow and moss.

They were not his brother's footprints, and the blood turned to ice in his veins as he followed them, stumbling down the incline, and finally coming to a rest beneath the winter-bare maples whose roots formed the edge of his favorite pond. Jesse lay among them, cold and still, the snow falling to rest on his hair and his face, the bared skin of his hands, melting into the still-warm pool of blood, an arrow in his chest.

He knew it for his own from the pattern of the fletching, the lacquer of the shaft. He knew that his lover was dead from his stillness, the lifeless emptiness of his half-opened eyes. The cold inside him cracked like ice breaking in the spring, split apart by howling, furious grief, and he tasted lightning, the breath of the storm, as the great dragons that shared his soul stirred, summoned by his rage and pain. He wished, hopelessly, for their jaws to close around him, to rend the lift from his flesh and devour whatever remained and the command to do so was on his tongue, when, from somewhere far away, he heard someone calling his name.

* 

The last time he woke up beside a Shimada with a glowing tattoo and eerily solid eyes, Doc Ziegler ended up treating him for second degree burns and gave him a scolding about how he should be more careful to not disturb said glowing Shimada's dragon by yelling directly into his ear. So when he woke up not only beside a Shimada with a glowing tattoo and eerily solid eyes but wrapped completely around him, Jesse was not only awake, but wide awake and completely aware of the precariousness of his situation.

Hanzo's lights were on in the most literal possible way but he was, just as obviously, not home -- seeing someplace not there, someone not him, body slowly curling less around him than around itself, pulling away. A low sound crawled up his throat and past his lips, a trapped animal noise of pain, and his eyes flicked closed, his whole face screwing up, and when they opened again tears spilled, catching the light and gleaming on his cheeks.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are grey. You'll never
know dear, how much I love you…" He had no idea where the song came from, just that it bubbled up on a surge of desperation and helplessness, the complete antithesis of the last time he'd been in this scenario. *Well,* he thought as he continued to sing, low and husky and gently stroking along Hanzo's arm in a manner he hoped was soothing and not agitating, *least it ain't 99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall.* He lost track of how long he held Hanzo there, singing half-remembered lyrics, looping the chorus, but gradually, Hanzo calmed. "C'mon back to me, Hanzo. Wake on up now, darlin'. M'right here."

A shuddering breath escaped him, not quite evolving into sobs or words, but slowly that dangerous glow died, skin faded back to ink, lightning strike eyes to warm amber-brown that were, for a moment, disoriented, unfocused, then came to rest on him. His voice, when he spoke, was rough with pain. "*Jesse.*"

"Hey." His voice was soft, soothing. Pitched to be as calming as possible. He smiled gently, laid a hand along Hanzo's cheek and stroked his fingertips along his temple. "Bad dreams again? You wanna talk about them, or ..? Just tell me what you need, love. I'm here."

Slowly, Hanzo's breathing steadied and the last of the tremors died away and his hands came to rest cradling Jesse's face. His eyes flicked closed and when he spoke his voice was soft and only shook a little. "I dreamt that you were dead by my hands."

Jesse's heart broke a little at the flicker of pain that flashed across his face. "Sweetheart," he said, taking one of Hanzo's hands and pressing it against his chest, so he could feel his heart beating. Covered it with his own when it might otherwise have jerked away, kept it trapped there between warm skin and cool metal. "Still alive. Still right here. You didn't, and you ain't gonna. I know that. Deep down, you know that too."

"Do I?" When he looked up again, his eyes glittered with unshed tears. "You *have* met my brother, have you not?"

"Darlin'," he said, with a rumble of a laugh trapped in his chest. "*Hanzo.* We're gonna have to have a nice, long chat about things if *anything* about our relationship reminds you of your brother."

"I have brought destruction upon everyone and everything I have ever loved." Hanzo replied, and the tremor that started in his hands rippled through his entire body. "Oh, I should have sent you away when I had the chance."

For a second, the words didn't want to parse, because Jesse didn't want to think about what he was going to have to say in return, to either of those things. "Sent me away," he echoed, deciding to tackle the thing that damaged his calm the least. "Why, exactly, would you think to send me away?"

"For your safety." It emerged a bare, miserable whisper and Hanzo's eyes slid away from his own, fixed on some point over his shoulder. "This is my fault -- I was foolish, careless, and now…" He stopped, swallowed with difficulty. "Your life is not mine to risk. I should not have asked it -- I should not have allowed it."

"Bless your heart." He could feel his blood pressure rising as his accent thickened, sure signs of anger of a depth he'd not suspected he'd possessed. "You're awful sweet to think you got any say over what I'm risking and for who, darlin'. Unless I vastly misunderstood the nature of things, you don't *allow* me shit, because you ain't my father, my commanding officer or my preferred deity of worship. And even *they* ain't got supreme authority over me, because I am a grown ass man capable of making my own decisions. What, exactly, led you to believe I was your fucking damsel in distress, Shimada?"
Hanzo's face went pale and expressionless all at once. "Genji hired me to protect you."

Jesse arched an eyebrow, desperately wanted to get out of bed and stalk around on the floor to relieve some of the agitation, but wasn't sure it would help matters. "And what, exactly, did you expect Genji told me I was doin' here, honeybunch? You're smarter'n that. Sure, you're protectin' me. Also, I'm protectin' you. He called my bar tab."

Hanzo's eyes flicked back to his face and he muttered something under his breath in Japanese that sounded rather distinctly like that little shit. It did not, however, sound particularly surprised. "What would you have me say to him if this harms you? If it kills you? Your life is a thousand times more valuable than my own -- I cannot ask you to risk it. I should never have brought you here."

Jesse eyed him balefully, because no one, not even Hanzo, could be this self-deluding, could they? "'Darlin', do you know what Overwatch is? Do you know what Blackwatch is? Are you aware I may be the only full time Blackwatch agent left livin' on this green Earth? I ain't fond of advertisin' that, but it counts for somethin'. I've been rollin' those dice for twenty years, and every time it ain't snake eyes, I know the end'a me's just a little bit closer. No point in worryin' about it. It's an inevitability."

"Yes! I know that. I know you are a hero, that you have risked your life for the good of humanity, for this world, and how can I not worry about it? Someone must if you will not. I -- you are more to me than a client, or a bedmate. You -- you cannot take such risks for me. I am not worthy of it if the price is your life, do you understand?" His hands slid to Jesse's shoulders, grip almost painfully tight.

"Your worth to me ain't your damn decision to make, Shimada!" With great effort, Jesse snapped his mouth shut and only opened it again when he was sure further speech would be at a volume lower than top-of-his-lungs. "It's mine, and I'll thank you kindly to not start dictating the state of our relationship to me without so much as a by-your-leave!" His hands closed on Hanzo's shoulders and flexed while he fought the urge to shake him until his teeth rattled. "You don't get to tell me I can't love you because you ain't worthy, you fuckin' asshole! That's for me to decide, not you! If I wanna trade my life for yours, I'm damned well gonna fuckin' do it, because only I get to determine what's good enough for me to freely give it. No tengo el chichi pa farolillos, Han-kun, but you'll drive me fuckin' crazy with this."

The last of the color drained from Hanzo's face and his eyes slid closed. "No. You will not." His eyes, when they opened, were cold and hard and bright. "You are even more a stubborn fool than I thought you were, and I believed you a great fool. You do not love me -- you have never met me. There is nothing to gain keeping you here now -- if you die, my arrangement with my brother is over."

He could feel it creeping in around the edges, the leeching cold that underlaid his voice and splintered through his limbs when he was at his most agitated, when he risked the most to gain the most in battle. "You are the most arrogant, obnoxious, self-centered asshole I have ever had the pleasure to meet," he said through gritted teeth, and hoped the resonant echoing was just in his head, not underscoring his words with unearthly edges, "but in no way are you being anything resembling convincing that I am just a job your brother gave you. Not the least because you literally just said not thirty seconds ago that I was more than that, and demonstrated quite aptly your utter fear at the thought I might die here, with you. But also because you just ain't that good a liar, Hanzo. I know you, and the thought I might scares you worse than anything else."

"Then you must KNOW that everything I have said is TRUE!" It came out an anguished howl. "I
am nothing -- I have never been anything -- but a killer. I strew death in my wake. I --"

"I love you anyway," Jesse said, ruthless and raw, over his words. "Deal with it."

*

Hanzo had no idea what to say, or to do, or to think, and certainly not what to feel. In the back of his mind, hissing serpentine laughter mocked him and a second, softer voice whispered urgently to him, and neither as clearly as the agony pulsing in his chest, knotting his throat.

"I do not know how to do this." He finally whispered, forcing the words past that almost-solid obstruction. "Nothing in my life has prepared me for you."

It hurt far more than he imagined possible to admit that, even now, the shame of confessing such a basic failure of humanity, of having never been enough. He wanted, more than anything at that moment, to take back all of the words he had just spoken, to have said nothing at all, to simply lay curled safe and warm in Jesse's arms. Fool, whispered that insidious inner voice, and before he could stop himself, more words poured out.

"When we were children, Genji and I at least had one another -- he was my friend, my only true friend, the one I knew was not using me for something he wanted. He already had everything I had, and more." He could not quite keep the bitterness from his voice and hated himself for it. "And as we grew older...he left me behind, to be our father's left hand, the firstborn and heir. It should have been enough for me but it was not -- I was jealous of him, jealous of the life he had beyond the grip of our family, of how deeply our father cherished him, of everything that he was and I was not." And now he could not take that back, either. "By the time the elders of the clan called upon me to discipline him, they did not have to argue very hard to convince me of the necessity. It was only afterwards...only after he was laying before me, I thought dead...did I know what I had done, the mistake I had made in anger and jealousy and cruelty." He stopped, swallowed with difficulty. "I feel that now -- that I am standing on the edge of making a terrible mistake, one whose consequences I will not bear."

Jesse was silent for a long moment, but his hands were infinitely gentle as they smoothed over his back and shoulders. "I," he said, rough and low, "have lost just about everythin' that meant anythin' to me, Hanzo. Never knew my birth parents. In and out of foster homes. Reyes was the first real stabilizing influence I had, and when I lost him...." His jaw worked as he swallowed. "I have never been in love. Never had someone like you. I survived everything in my life, got through it with a smile and a snarky one-liner, but I ain't gonna survive you. I don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, or next week, or whenever the Georgians show up here, but I know you are absolutely it for me, darlin'. You're the one. I am all in here, Hanzo. All I am, all I have, all I can do, is yours. You didn't ask for it, but I'm givin' it to you. That mistake you feel like you're about to make. Y'think the mistake might be throwin' all that away because you're afraid of somethin' new?"

"Yes." Hanzo replied, softly, despite mocking laughter and encouraging whispers both, and pressed away the last of the distance between their bodies. "I would not throw this away. Never. I regret causing you pain today. I regret tearing you away from the peace of a life where you can sit on our balcony all day playing Mah Jong with the Old Men and fully half our neighbors are planning our wedding for us. And know that your life is worth more to me than my own. For the sake of this one, who loves you, please do not make me fear for it more than I must." He pressed the softest of his kisses to the corner of Jesse's mouth. "Please forgive me my foolishness."

"Meilin is a pushy sort," Jesse said with a faint laugh, "and I don't trust Tieh to not try ta talk me into wearin' some sort of floral arrangement in my hair. He has a thing for lilies." He sighed then, ending it with a smile, and the last of the tension drained out of his frame, sinking him loose-
limbed into the cushion of the pillows and mattress. "Course I forgive you," he rumbled, closing his eyes. There was a hint of a smirk, a gleam of a grin when he added, "Even if I am a very great fool to do so."

"My fool." Hanzo laid his head on his breast, tangled their legs together. "I am so sorry, beloved." He paused, considered the mental image, and decided. "You would look lovely with lilies in your hair. Golden lilies. And a crimson and golden wedding kimono."

Jesse went still in his arms. Still and silent, before finally, with deliberate, tense casualness: "… Hanzo? Did you just… Are you --"

"You would make me the most blissful fool in this world if you would consent to be my husband." Softly. "I will also understand if you do not. This has been something of a terrible day for these sorts of considerations."

"Shut up," he replied, choked and strangled. "And kiss me, cos hell yes I will. Offer like that? I'd be the fool to say no."

"Meilin will be beside herself with glee." Hanzo leaned up, eyes stinging, and caught his face, kissed his mouth and the ridge of his cheekbones and the lids of his eyes, kissed him as breathless as he himself felt.

*

"If I had to wager a bet," Jesse said, leaning down on his way past the entertainment area where Hanzo perched on the couch with Alecto's tablet in front of him, "they'll come tonight, with the dark and the snowstorm we're supposed to have." Mindful of the chilled skin of his face, he pressed a kiss to Hanzo's temple, then finished his journey to the other side of the room, where a stack of heated towels waited beside the hot tub, and groaned in bliss as his frozen fingers burrowed in warm terry. "It's colder'n Mercy's heart out there."

"Do we want to invite them inside or surprise them with an impromptu snowball party?" Hanzo asked contemplatively -- they had a few cases of party favors yet to unpack.

"It's so lovely of them to come all the way out here to visit," he drawled, slinging the towel around his neck and shivering with more bliss as the heat leeched into his skin. "I'm sure they'd appreciate a proper surprise party to welcome them to the neighbourhood."

"Very well, then." Hanzo smiled and extracted three smaller packing crates, opened them to reveal a double handful of what Jesse knew to be particle beam antipersonnel turrets. "I purchased these for the apartment some time ago but I found no graceful way to work them into the architecture."

Jesse eyed them with honest appreciation as he crossed back over the floor and sank onto the couch beside Hanzo, slinging an arm over the back of the couch behind him. "Woulda made Mah Jong a lot more interestin', I'll say that," he remarked, and delicately plucked one out of his lover's hand. "Trees? Or upper stories?"

"Both?" A dry smile curled the corners of his mouth. "We should not, however, set them to autofire. Their batteries are robust but not that robust."

"I am more than capable of incorporating these defenses into my security protocols," Alecto said, and Jesse eyed the tablet on the coffee table with a lot less trepidation than he thought he'd feel. She'd proven herself far more useful than not in the last few days, and despite his insistence that she wasn't a god program, displayed the cunning intelligence and clarity of tactical observation
he'd frankly woken her up for. "Jesse, Agent Shimada, would you permit me to oversee the judicial application of these turrets during any assault upon the premises?"

Jesse mulled that over, couldn't think of a damned reason why not. That might have alarmed him more than anything else, but it didn't. "What do you think, darlin'?"

"I have no objection." Another little smile. "Well, one objection. Please avoid any damage to the house, if possible. I would hate to lose our damage deposit."

"Yes," Jesse said dryly, deciding that he was warm enough to not warrant Hanzo's retaliation, and soundlessly reminded him as much fun as being manhandled was, Jesse outweighed him by fifty pounds and topped him by four inches by dragging him into his lap with a single tug. Perfect kissing range. "Gods forbid we lose our damage deposit with scorch marks to the exterior. He's already upset enough about breaking the pool table the other day."

"Incorrigible." Hanzo murmured against his mouth and took the hint.
Chapter 7

This time they did, in fact, sleep and watch in shifts: four hours on, four hours off. Alecto maintained alertness constantly, monitoring externalities: communications originating from the homes and offices of Vachnadze-Melikov's assorted senior and junior functionaries to their hirelings, the movements of assorted forces branching out from there, the local weather reports, and adjusted the forces under her own command accordingly. In the small hours of the morning, the threatened heavy weather rolled in: a snowstorm with the potential to evolve into a genuine blizzard, pouring down the Canadian Rockies, driven by winds from the Arctic Circle.

Hanzo woke to her gentle alarm chime to find the world beyond the master suite's windows shrouded almost entirely in white, the snow falling so thickly he could not see to the end of the deck. It was not quite cold enough next to the windows to see his breath but it was close and, as he turned to add more wood to the bedroom fire, the door opened and Jesse entered, pushing a hovercart ahead of him, hair still damp and sparkling slightly with frost.

"And a good mornin' to you, darlin'." Jesse greeted him with a perfectly cheerful smile, a warmly thorough kiss, and a mug of freshly brewed coffee. "Sleep well?"

"Oddly enough, yes." The actual tension of waiting was over -- now that conflict was a certainty, and their preparations for it discussed, finalized, made, he found himself entirely serene. "Conditions?"

"Absolutely craptacular." Again with that same perfect, almost manic good cheer -- he looked like a child on a festival morning, as though the prospect of engaging in life-or-death violence was the best thing he could imagine just now. "There's at least a foot and a half of new snow out there and it's falling at a rate of at least an inch an hour. Whiteout for all practical intents and purposes. That'll fuck with their plans more than ours. Want some breakfast?"

"Oh, yes." And he helped lay out the table: crock of oatmeal enriched with honey and nuts, boiled eggs, grilled sausages, freshly baked buns with butter and jam and spreadable cheese, high-energy food for what was likely going to be a long and stressful and unpleasantly cold day. Jesse had clearly done this, or something close enough to it for government work, and also knew how to prepare.

They ate in relative silence while Alecto murmured updates in the background:

"The Prodigy Security team has landed at a private airstrip just outside of Banff -- they seem to be having some difficulty obtaining enough all-terrain hover vehicles to accommodate the team and their equipment. Someone on site lost the work order, how terrible for them."

And:

"I am not certain they entirely understood the conditions they would be working in -- someone sent them the wrong weather faxes. Oh, dear."

And:

"They are finally getting underway. They seem to believe their ETA should be about two hours but I am certain their nav computers will be experiencing significant guidance malfunctions. So many high level atmospheric disturbances right now, how could they not?"

"Yer the best, Alecto." Jesse grinned and leaned back in his chair. "Still, we oughta get our game
"Agreed." Hanzo rose and retrieved their equipment cases from the walk-in closet, handed Jesse his. "Do you want the bathroom, or…?"

"I'll take the nanny suite. Need a little room to spread out." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Hanzo's forehead. "Seeya in a bit, darlin'."

"Yes." He reached up, caught Jesse by the chin, and pulled him in for a far more serious expression of affection and they were both breathless when they parted. "You do not have my leave to die, Agent McCree. Remember that."

The corners of his dark eyes crinkled with his smile. "Of course, darlin'."

* 

It felt a little like coming home after a long absence, he thought as he settled the breastplate of his body armor into place and listened to the hiss of it sealing around his torso. He rolled his shoulders experimentally, nodded with satisfaction at his range of motion, and lifted out his gun belt and holster to strap over the denim of his jeans. The manic cheer of this morning had not dissipated at all, simply sat and percolated like great coffee, until it was a steady sense of anticipation settling into his gut and spreading through his veins.

His favourite part of an op was always the very beginnings of it, before everything went pear-shaped, before the blood started spilling, when it was endless possibility and infinite opportunity stretching out before him. It was nice to know that, even at thirty-four, a new mission could still make him feel like a kid.

He packed his kit onto himself like he was checking off a list. Six stun grenades. Ammo tucked into as many pockets as could hold them. A pistol on each thigh, a knife in each boot. A cigar and his lighter in his front ammo pouch, and his hat on his head. He stared for a moment, indecisive, between his thick winter jacket and his dusty old serape, before regretfully electing for the winter jacket. He'd promised, after all, that he wouldn't die on Hanzo's watch, and he supposed that meant ensuring he didn't freeze to death either.

He found himself whistling as he sauntered down the short span of corridor between the nanny suite and the master bedroom, glove tucked into his belt, jacket slung nonchalantly over his shoulder and hat at a jaunty angle on his head. The anticipation was rising now, bringing months-dormant skills out of slumber, reawakening all that muscle memory decades of life as Jesse McCree had drilled into his body. He tapped with the back of two knuckles on the partly-open door, grinning broadly as he stepped in. "Y'ready, pumpkin? Or are you still workin' on gettin' your hair done?"

Hanzo was, in fact, tying his hair up and back, pulling tight the knot on his golden silk ribbon, but the rest was already done: storm-blue and black armor that didn't quite cling like a second skin and which was likely nowhere near ballistic impact resistant, one shoulder and arm bared, bow strung and laid out waiting next to not one but two fully loaded quivers. "Almost." He finished tying off the knot, curling the trailing ends of the ribbon just so to keep them out of his face. "Now I am done."

Jesse arched an eyebrow, looking him up and down. He wasn't sure if he wanted to tear off all his clothes because damn, that armor was doing things to him, or break out his very best Mercy-inspired mother-henning. "Uh huh," he said, noncommittal, and crossed the room to flick the catch on the window, squinting against the expected frigid blast as he cracked it open. "Are you sure you
wanna go out without a jacket?" he continued, hoping the breeze would make his point for him. "Cos I kinda like your nipples where nature put 'em, not frozen and fallen off."

Hanzo's left eye twitched slightly but he manfully resisted the urge to visibly shiver -- instead, he pulled up his left sleeve and pulled on his left glove. "A jacket will impede my draw, I fear."

Jesse shrugged easily, tossed his jacket to the side. "Sounds like every protest I gave you about my jacket," he said agreeably. "I'll go get my serape then."

"I objected to the serape," Hanzo said from between clenched teeth, "because it is bright red and will flap in the breeze like a flag with the words shoot here embroidered on it."

"Of the two of us, I'm just gonna say once again that I'm wearing ungodly-highly rated ballistic armor," Jesse felt compelled to point out, "an' you quite specifically said I wasn't allowed to freeze to death. So same goes for you, honeybunch."

"My clothing is thermally lined." Hanzo pointed out, somewhat testily. "But if you insist I will try."

"I think I do." But before Hanzo could move in the direction of the closet where his jacket was hanging, Jesse stepped in and ducked his head down for a long, soft kiss. "You don't have my permission to die either, Agent Shimada," he murmured. "Do try to keep that in mind?"

His expression softened the tiniest fraction. "I shall."

"Good." As Jesse retrieved his jacket from the bed where it had landed, he added, "Alecto says there's at least forty headed our way--"

"A sixth team has just landed, Jesse," Alecto cut in smoothly. "I estimate they will have ample time to catch up with the main assault team prior to their final approach on the house. Please adjust your tallies to sixty, minimum."

That drained instantly some of the good cheer keeping Jesse buoyant, and he stole a glance over his shoulder to where Hanzo stood, checking the detrimentals of his jacket like any self-respecting detail-oriented sociopath. "Sixty, huh. Hell, darlin', bet I get more than you do."

Hanzo flicked a glance over his shoulder so pointed with disdain it could have punched a hole in his breastplate and finished his range of motion exercises. "You will not."

Jesse's grin was so wide it hurt his cheeks. Hanzo actually sounded offended. "Sure about that? I am a good shot, you know."

"It is," Hanzo replied, baring his teeth just a little in the sort of grin that could start a man's pulse racing if it weren't already, "an absolute certainty."

"And what are you gonna give me when I leave you eatin' dust, love of my life?"

"In the extremely unlikely event of your victory," Hanzo's voice dropped slightly, "I will do as you ask and tell our close friends in Hong Kong my true name."

Jesse sucked in a breath, and the shit-eating smile slid away. "I ain't gonna examine how you're only promising that because you think you're gonna whip me pretty handily," he said solemnly, "an' just say that if you actually manage to outshoot me…." Another deep breath, and the smile came back, softer and fonder than before. "My victory cigar will be the very last one I ever light. I'll give Zheng the rest of the box back home."
"Agreed." Hanzo replied, before either of them could go back on it. "Lady Alecto, will you keep count?"

"Of course." And damned if she didn't sound outright amused.

*

Agent Shimada selected his security drones with the utmost of attention to their utility and quality, and Alecto approved of his choices. These models came equipped with heat-sensing optics, and the Prodigy Security forces stood out like beacons in the frigid wind-tossed snow and sleet. Alecto opened two, six, twelve pairs of eyes and the storm was no match for them.

She had not expected to like Agent Shimada, when Commander McCree first woke her up and set her to watching for attempts on his life. When she had originally formed her first attachments, under the watchful, cautious approval of then-Commander Reyes to then-Agent McCree, she never had thought she would approve of romantic entanglements with the potential to oust her from her place of importance. She was not the jealous one of her sisters, but the thought that then-Agent McCree would one day not speak to her again made her feel as though her code was corrupting uncontrollably.

Agent Shimada, she would admit, exceeded every exacting standard she could ever have had, and far from displacing her from her place of importance, expanded and redefined her importance until she felt fully indispensable to not just one but both of them. She fully approved of his intimate presence in Commander McCree's life and intended to tell him so on her earliest available opportunity.

"Three groups," she said instead on the narrow-band frequency Commander McCree and Agent Shimada elected to use, because this was not her earliest available opportunity, "twenty apiece. Twelve, four, eight o'clock, approaching under cover."

"Thank you, darlin'," Commander McCree said, and the words curled through her subroutines in a way that felt warm and pleasurable. "Hanzo, you ready to head upstairs, pumpkin?"

"I am already en route." Agent Shimada's voice, in contrast, swirled across her awareness like a cool breeze, steady and reassuring and as solid as a glacier. Also as implacable as one. "Lady Alecto, if you would be so kind as to greet our guests?"

"Of course, Agent Shimada," she returned warmly, and somewhere on the edges of her network, the outermost ring of antipersonnel turrets began spinning through their brief warmup cycle. She monitored the approach of the Prodigy teams through the drones' thermic capabilities until she judged they were within acceptable killzone parameters. "Engaging hostiles now," she reported a half-second ahead of the burst of particle beam fire.

She noted, for Agent Shimada's later review, the speed with which the leading individuals dropped to the snow, how acceptable a recharge time each turret had, and how the storm muffled both screams and weapons fire to the point where Alecto felt comfortable calculating a negligible probability any team had been heard by the other two. Commander McCree's forte was not logistics, despite his clear talent for it, but Agent Shimada would appreciate her foresight, of that she was sure.

"How many'd you get, Alecto?" Commander McCree wanted to know, and Alecto adjusted her tallies according to the number of moving thermals, now out of range and line-of-sight of the turrets' tracking systems.
"Thirteen. Six at eight o'clock. Four at twelve, and three at four."

"Mmph." He sounded displeased. "Not as many as I'd like. Keep yer optics open for when they come back into range, Alecto. Call 'em, sweetheart."

Agent Shimada inhaled sharply, once. "Four o'clock," he said tightly, and on the edges of Drone Nine's optics, she saw/sensed/recorded his thermal shifting in a manner she associated with archery. "One."

"Any attempt to get yer counter ahead'a mine, I see." Commander McCree sounded amused. "Fine and dandy, sugar. Have your fun. Won't do you any good once I get outside."

"It will-- two -- not happen, beloved. You may begin composing your farewell to cigars now."

"I'm gonna make a big banner for our balcony, an' it's gonna say Hanzo and Jesse's Place."

"Perhaps you would like a reminder of the current count, my heart? Lady Alecto, will you oblige?"

"Of course," she said, though she was abruptly distracted by the odd manner in which a group of thermals moved. She directed Drone Six to drop down lower, out of the cover of the wind and blowing snow, to attempt determining the strange activity. "Agent Shimada's tally is currently two, whereas Jesse's is nil. Agent Shimada is currently in the lead."

"Just cos I ain't first out of the gate--"

As Commander McCree and Agent Shimada bickered good-naturedly over the comm channel, Alecto focused more of her resources on puzzling out the behaviour of the Prodigy forces, clustered together around a roughly hover-sized void in her readings. As Drone Six descended perilously close to the ground, it caught a split-second break in the storm, and recorded a clear picture of what could not be mistaken as anything but the bulk of an industrial-grade field EMP generator already almost through its power-up cycle.

If Alecto had eyes, they would have gone wide in fear. They had prepared for commercially available EMPs. They had not prepared for the most powerful portable generator not commercially available.

No time to hack in. No time to warn her people. No time for anything but a split-second command decision driven by the singular thought that Commander McCree must not be compromised.

The safeguards had been installed decades ago, and Alecto found them still in place, dormant and undiscovered. As she settled the two drones above the house onto the balcony and rapidly powered them down to preserve their electronics, she blasted a furious stream of hexadecimal (43 68 61 72 6f 6e 65 6d 70 69 6e 63 6b 69 6c 6c 6f 31 35 73 65 63 61 75 74 68 61 65 63 74 6f 30 31) into the receivers of Commander McCree's cyberware, then hung in the agony of uncertainty for a long nanosecond before a stream of hex code broadcast back (4d 73 67 72 65 63 76 64 6b 69 6c 6c 6f 64 65 61 63 74 67 61 75 74 68 63 68 61 72 6f 30 35 68 69 73 69 74 6c 6f 34 6c 74 72).

She wasn't sure whether the feeling that came over her then, folding herself as tightly and as small as she could to ride out the electromagnetic pulse already beginning to scramble her connections, was unbelievable relief or sickened dread.
At some point, every plan went FUBAR and pear-shaped, but Jesse hadn't thought literal first-contact with the enemy would be the turning point to this one. He also didn't think that his first clue the plan had gone off the rails would come by his entire arm going abruptly dead and dragging him to the floor when it dropped to his side.

He absolutely did not squawk or screech, and he would delete any recordings Alecto was making of the conversation that proved otherwise.

"Beloved?" No imagining the worry in Hanzo's voice, that sudden spike of concern, but Jesse was too busy trying to process the fact that he was on the floor with a fucking dead arm to even begin offering any sort of reassurance to Hanzo. "Jesse!"

Then the comms went dead, and the house plunged into abrupt, silent darkness.

In the stillness with only the harsh panting of his near-panicked breath to keep him company, Jesse shivered with a thrill of deep, dark fear of the likes he hadn't experienced since he was a child hiding from one foster parent or another. He squeezed his eyes shut, forced himself to count-inhale, a slow count of four inhale, a slow count of four exhale. Before his second four-count inhale, his arm chirped and, as he glanced in utter shock at it, began rebooting.

What the fuck? went through his mind, but as feeling and function rushed back into the prosthetic, Jesse decided he wasn't gonna question it terribly hard, and just hope it didn't happen again. He also wasn't gonna dwell too deeply on what Hanzo would have to say about that decision, because he had no intention of telling him.

The backup generators, good old fashioned reliable oil-guzzlers, were just turning over, restoring vague illumination with the dim emergency lighting, but even a gloomy foyer was better than a pitch black foyer. A quick check of the comms proved them dead in the water, and Jesse sighed as he pulled the earpiece out of his ear and tossed it to clatter somewhere under the divan. An EMP, clearly, which might have explained his arm, if his arm had gone dead at the same time the lights had.

"Alecto?" he called into the depths of the murky cabin, pitching his voice hopefully low enough to not alert anyone outside. "You still with us, darlin'?"

"They were equipped with blueberries," Alecto said, and Jesse frowned because he wasn't sure she should sound that dazed or scrambled from a simple EMP. "I am mush. Go and play reindeer games."

He didn't even bother to try and suss out the actual words she'd intended, because the spirit was pretty damned clear. The impulse to go into the other room and check on her with his own two eyes, however, was stymied by the unmistakeable sound of military-issue boots trying to sneak two hundred pounds of cretin across frost-stiffened wooden boards. "You rest, darlin'," he said, and reached up to adjust his hat firmly on his head before sidling up to the door and readying himself to dive on through. "You did good. Hanzo and I've got it from here."

In a flurry of motion, he flung open the door, threw himself out and to the left, and Peacekeeper cleared leather as he hit a perfect, parallel trajectory to the deck. Adrenaline kicked in a half-second later, and then time hung slow and sticky. He had all the time in the world to squeeze the trigger one, two, three times, see the bullets displacing the air as they shot forward on their merry.
Time resumed its normal speed as he hit the deck with his shoulder, curled himself into a roll, and came on up on his feet in a crouch with his back to the snow-covered rail as the three-man squad that had been sneaking up the front steps abruptly crumpled to the ground. "Three," he said to himself, grinning like a goddamn fool, because weird shit pinging the meter or not, he was pretty sure that meant he was now in the lead.

* 

The cabin's roof was typical of the climate: a single strong spine pierced at each end by an enormous stone chimney, canted to shed snow before it could build to crushing pressure, shingled in fire-resistant photovoltaic tile. At the moment, it was covered in at least six inches of freshly fallen snow atop at least two inches of compacted ice and the wind was blowing from the northwest quadrant in erratic buffets and lulls. And it was still snowing. Hanzo, who had learned how to keep his balance on the heights in far steeper and less forgiving conditions, took shelter in the lee of one of the chimneys, where his own heat signature would be muddled, and asked the dragons for the gift of their vision.

In the deep parts of his being, he felt them stir, uncertain: he had made no such request of them in a very long time, had in truth barely called upon them at all unless forced by outrageous fortune to do so. They did not debate between themselves long, however, and between one breath and the next he felt it -- not only his vision sharpening, but all of his senses growing a noticeable degree more acute. He could see, with perfect clarity, the leading vanguard of the group at twelve o'clock, paralleling the no longer perfectly plowed driveway, using the trees for cover, advancing in pairs, professional, disciplined. He nearly felt sorry for them as he drew, adjusted the angle of his fire to account for the wind vortices he could now perceive as flickers in the fabric of the air, and fired twice, in rapid succession. He did not wait to watch them fall but dropped swiftly to the far side of the roof, the gravity-resistance assist in his equipment helping him cling to the steep surface as he ran.

A squawk of agitation came through the comms and nearly fractured his concentration, forcing him to finish the last few feet in a leap and cling to the windward side of the opposite chimney. "Beloved?" No answer came through the line. "Jesse?"

Something passed through the air -- something that would, under other circumstances, have been utterly beyond perception but with the dragon's gift left a shock-echo stretched across his awareness, even as the comm unit in his ear crackled and died. He tapped it, once, with no result and removed it, shoving it into his pocket, even as he listened to the house's electrical system cycling down and the emergency generators chugging slowly to life. An energetic pulse and, skittering higher on the chimney, he saw its source, half-concealed in the dense pine forest at eight o'clock: unwieldily large, far larger than his own preparations had accounted for, a military grade EMP generator. It had already fired once and he could see, as he considered angles of fire and weapons of choice, that it was cycling to do so again, four members of the team dressed more like technicians than combat specialists, armed and armored accordingly, attending it. The first scatter arrow struck the trunk of a tree to the left at an oblique angle, the flechettes propagating in a fan-shaped spray across the tiny clearing in which the generator sat, spiking it at multiple points and sending two of the four technicians to the ground. The second scatter arrow did the same to the right, a bit less elegantly and at a harder angle, pinning one of the technicians to the side of his weapon -- he could not tell if any of the flechettes made contact with the fourth technician, who was hidden behind the bulk of the generator even at his high angle.

Hanzo regretfully decided to count that as only three and repositioned.

*
Jesse didn't want to say he was having the time of his life, because that might force a re-examination of his life choices and poor impulse control issues, given that he was in a firefight with a squad of at least four, but he'd be totally lying if he said he wasn't. He wasn't sure what it was about this fight in particular, whether it was having someone up high again he could trust to have his back -- even if he had to squint and focus and really concentrate to see even the vaguest flicker of movement on the roof, and he knew Hanzo was up there -- or whether it was a rediscovery of the joy that came from actually fighting in more than just the basic motions of staying alive. He didn't particularly care either. He was alive, fighting against absolutely ridiculous odds, and he was more than holding his own pretty handily, if he said so himself.

He poked his head above the rail and the snow to take a quick look at the field of battle before him, reaching to the bandolier of grenades he carried to pull one off, slipping his thumb into the loop of the pin. He scanned fast and wide, and ducked down again with his free hand on his hat when gunfire erupted from the enemy positions. Their locations burned in bright geometric shapes on his mental map of the terrain, and he grinned as he readied another grenade. "Y'all'd be doin' yourselves a favor," he called over to them, feeling it only fair to give them an out they were going to desperately need if they kept themselves that bared to the sky, "if y'just crawled on home now. This ain't gonna go well for any y'all!"

The gunfire stuttered, and fell silent, and then a somewhat-familiar voice called incredulously back, "Jesus fuck! McCree? Is that you?"

"If it ain't, I stole his hat," Jesse returned, eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he tried to place the voice. "Dietrich? Gustav Dietrich? Didn't I kill you in El Paso?"

"Almost! Not quite!" Oh yeah, it was all coming back to him now at the low, coarse guffaw that rolled over the snow back towards him. "Well I'll be fucked sideways, McCree. The precis didn't mention you at all! Prodigy woulda sent more if they'd known you'd be here. Small goddamn world, huh? How'd you end up hooking up with Shimada?"

"Don't think you'd believe me if I told ya." Jesse wriggled his ass until he shifted -- imperceptibly to the mercenaries, he hoped -- a foot to the right, a much better position from which to start tossing projectiles. "You still runnin' with Goldstein and Leonhardt?"

"Was! Til your turrets cut 'em down ten minutes ago!"

Jesse tilted his head back, feeling a muted, savage sense of satisfaction at that. The three of them together had damned near crippled him in El Paso a few years back, and he couldn't say he was much torn up that two of them had passed. The sound of snow crunching to his left caught his attention, and the geometrically decorated map in his mind's eye acquired a questioning triangle. "My condolences for your loss. They have favorite flowers? I'll send some to their funerals."

"No condolences needed, McCree!" Dietrich sounded pleased beyond measure. "You just saved me from sharin' the bounty on your head two more ways! Sixty million dollars for Jesse McCree's head, boys! Let's get 'em!"

Time to move. Jesse rolled forward and twisted as he came up, and once again time stretched into taffy as his vision encompassed his enemies. The shiiing of the metallic pins sliding out of the grenades sang across his synapses, and he felt his grin stretch into eternity as he threw them with both hands, watched the blinking spheres twist and gleam in the blowing snow, arcing gracefully through the whorls of wind to bounce twice and roll gently to a stop at the feet of Dietrich's four-man squad, who were only just now beginning to react.

One stun grenade would knock them out for sure. The concussive force from two exploding
simultaneously, he'd discovered quite by accident a few years back, would turn their brains to jelly inside their skulls. "Seven!" he called with a wild laugh, as if Hanzo could hear him above the storm, and then ducked and covered as the grenades clicked their final ominous click.

Snow rained down on him from the shockwave, and he came up with Peacekeeper in hand, only to duck down again as the vanguard of one of the rear groups -- four o'clock, he thought -- opened fire on him before sliding back around the corner of the house.

He risked staying up just long enough to roll two more concussive grenades their way, bracing against the backlash of snow again, and made a face at the two bodies that flopped into view. "Nine!" he yelled belated, before being abruptly forced to seek safe ground once again as the line of mercenaries behind them came into line-of-sight with their guns blazing.

* 

The sound of concentrated fully automatic fire echoed up from the front of the house and Hanzo went to meet it, sliding down the steep forward side of the roof, anchoring himself on the edge of the overhang. He could not help the torrent of snow that accompanied the movement but, for a miracle, no one currently engaged below seemed to notice, the promise of collecting on Jesse's perfectly ludicrous bounty capturing more attention than the appearance of their actual target, however so briefly. He flickered into motion again, drew not quite there around him like a cloak, a shadow barely visible in the snowfall and chose his point of weakness.

The teams on eight o'clock were moving to reinforce twelve, sensible since twelve was, he estimated, reduced by at least half, Jesse cheerfully counting off his kills somewhere below, still under at least some cover. Once the two forces converged that cover would be compromised at best, untenable at worst, and, worst of all, they would probably end up losing even more of their damage deposit.

He fired a scatter arrow at the ragged edge of the advancing eight o'clock forces and, from the cries of pain and anguished death-gurgles, accounted for some small number, and drove the others to seek safety away from their second, unseen assailant. For a beautifully perfect moment, they were clustered together, the majority of eight and twelve, and, even at his distance, he could hear the argument starting over how many ways they were going to divide Jesse's bounty.

Hanzo smiled, drew, and called the dragons.

He felt their answer crackling beneath his skin as they tasted his cold and killing rage, clear and bright and fierce, tasted the lightning on his tongue and drew it into his lungs as he breathed, heard their voices as ringing thunder in his ears as he invoked their wrath. The shot was true and Mizuchi and Zentatsu surged forth from their encasement in his flesh and soul as it flew, ending lodged in the throat of the mercenary leading the charge, the great dragons of the storm scything through their massed numbers, roaring their fury as they went. He felt it as they killed, as they fed, snuffing out lives by the handful, rending flesh and devouring their due and curling away into the sky as his ability to sustain their presence in the world flagged.

For a moment, it was all he could do to cling to the edge of the roof as the strength he had shared to guide them rushed out of him and dissipated with them. He was, he knew, vulnerable: no one could have missed the source of that, even if the radiant heat of the dragons' passage had not temporarily cleared the air. Below, the survivors were no doubt in shock, but they would not remain that way for long.

With more effort than he liked, he gathered his legs back beneath him and just barely managed to avoid the burst of automatic weapons fire sent in his direction, stitching across the roof at his
heels. He dove over the peak and hit the far side of the roof in a roll, permitted his momentum to carry him off the edge and down onto the snow-covered deck. There he paused to catch his breath, took a mouthful of fresh snow to ease the lightning-parched ache of his throat, and vaulted over the balustrade, dropping to the ground to continue the hunt.

* 

The wash of energy knocked the hat off his head, and knocked him right on his ass because as badass as he generally assumed Hanzo to be, and as dragon-fied as he knew Hanzo was, and the handful of times he'd seen Genji pull a dragon out of his ass, he somehow had not expected motherfucking dragons to come roaring and slaughtering to his rescue. He got back on his feet slowly, eyes wide and fixed like a child on Christmas morning to the dragons twining their way across the battlefield, consuming anyone idiot enough to stand in their path. Automatic fire cut right through them without any discernable damage, and only those that dropped their weapons and ran screaming from their vicinity had a prayer of surviving.

Jesse still had the incredibly insane urge to hold out his hand and let it swish through the sidewash of blue as they passed him, and only the sudden image of Hanzo's most likely reaction to him doing that kept his hand at his side.

He followed the path of heat-cleared air back to the roof in time to see Hanzo go over the crest of the roof with automatic gunfire stitching a line in the trodden-down snow behind him, and his heart jumped into his throat. Almost before he knew what he was doing, he took three long-legged strides, emerging atop a snowbank like the king of the hill, and started shooting with one hand fanning the hammer and the other squeezing the trigger as fast as he could. He ducked down long enough to reload, and then cautiously crept out again when immediate silence and distant shouts met his emergence.

He took a moment to count and scowled. "Dirty rotten cheater," he grumbled, figuring his count was somewhere around sixteen now, and Hanzo's hovering in the low 20s. "Dragons are cheatin', Shimada!" he hollered in the direction of the house, but it did almost nothing to ease the growing concern that he might actually get outshot by someone who wanted him to quit smoking. And that was just unacceptable.

He put a seventeenth out of his misery on his way to the stairs leading to the upper decks, more mercy than anything else, with the way those flechettes had cut him open and turned the snow around him deep red, and started climbing.

The view from up top was breathtaking but disturbingly empty -- there Hanzo had rolled down the roof and there he'd hit the deck but now he was nowhere in easy view, either pulling sneaky ninja tricks to keep eyes off him, friendly or otherwise, or --

A burst of automatic fire from the general direction of four o'clock drew his attention and that was where he found Hanzo, crouched in the lee of the wall, pinned down, three squads of three advancing on his position with obvious murderous intent.

Not on my watch, he told himself as he pulled Peacekeeper again and took a deep, centering breath, even though he knew he could get three of the nine at best, even though he could see how exhausted Hanzo was, how badly he was listing against the dubious shelter of the wall.

But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but doing his damnedest to end the life trying to end the light of his.

He drew deep, let himself fall into that void in the middle of him, where there was nothing but the
shot and the kill, where the world bled watery red and the cold of perfect geometric calculation leech into everything, where he had time unending, because the world was in limbo and he was its master.

He could get three. He could only ever get three.

But when he opened his eyes again, viewed his surroundings through the filter of blood and ice, he knew he would kill six.

He heard them all, every shot in succession, saw the bullets leave his barrel as his laugh rolled out like the touch of death skittering along the spines of his targets, freezing them in place before they crumbled like dominos, one-two-three-four-five-six souls on their way to pay the ferryman looming unseen over them.

As warmth and light and color returned to the world, strength and energy left him. Jesse sagged against the chimney, wordlessly, disbelievingly staring at the six bodies now cooling in the snow.

"Twenty-three," he croaked, and closed his eyes to sigh in relief.

Which is, of course, when the bullet took him in the chest and spun him off the roof to the frozen, hard-packed ground below.

* 

In retrospect, abandoning the high ground might not have been his finest tactical decision of the last few days. He discovered the precise level of deficiency fairly quickly as a high velocity sniper round slammed into the deck support close enough to his head that the resulting shrapnel sliced a burning line across his cheek. He dove and rolled at once, seeking shelter behind the most solid source available -- the border wall lining the back yard of the property, which helpfully absorbed the incoming fire now directed solely at his person. Moving carefully, he eased an arrow out of his quiver and set it to the string, waited for the pause in fire that might signal reloading or might signal the decision to conserve ammunition, came up and fired. The sonic arrow passed among them, impacting nothing, but painting an unhappy picture to his dragon-graced senses: nine.

He had four arrows left in the quiver, none of them a scatter, because that would have made the situation slightly less desperate. Nine, three groups of three, advancing in squads, and the fire began again, chewing away at the outer face of his shield -- which was not, in fact, meant to take such abuse. He would have to break cover to shoot again because, if he did not, Jesse would come around the corner of the house into the teeth of that fire and have not even the dubious shelter of an ornamental wall to protect him.

He closed his eyes, drew calm and detachment in with the icy air, painted their positioning in his mind. If he was fortunate, he could take the first three before the next squad opened fire, and he drew two arrows, set one to the string.

The gunfire ceased and he made ready to rise, but before he could do more than begin his turn, a flare of crimson radiance from above drew his eye. Jesse stood in the high vantage he had abandoned, limned in a corona of flaring, flickering radiance brighter than the sunrise, weapon drawn, a grin curling his mouth and his eyes lit from within by a bloody light that promised death to all that he beheld. Jesse's weapon spoke -- three shots, but in the ringing silence that followed he heard six bodies fall to the ground beyond his sanctuary.

Jesse's voice, rough with weariness, drifted down. "Twenty-three."
And then the bullet, fired by the sniper who must not have been within his killing range, took him high in the body -- in the chest, or the neck, or the head -- and the last of his light guttered away and he fell.

Within him, his dragons howled and it was all he could do not to howl with them. Instead he rose, and fired smoothly between the two stunned survivors, his arrow taking the sniper near the treeline precisely between the eyes. The remaining pair had the time it took him to vault the wall in which to regret the choices that brought them there before the second arrow he held found its home in an eye socket and the third in a throat. And then Hanzo was sprinting toward the front of the house, eyes burning, holding a scream behind his teeth by sheer force of will, knowing already what he would see and that he was a fool and that his heart had, indeed, paid the price for it.

*  

Stupid, stupid, stupid, his inner Hanzo yelled in irate Japanese in the back of his head, and Jesse sprawled in the snowbank for long moment, eyes closed and melting snow trickling uncomfortably down the back of his neck. Inner Hanzo was a dream vacation compared to the verbal flaying he had perfect faith he was in for the second his real Hanzo came flying around the house, or over the house, or on the back of a goddamn dragon for all he knew.

Still, he'd take it, sit there through every angry probably-multilingual insult to his intelligence, his parentage and his survival instincts, because it meant he was alive. It meant he was alive, and Hanzo was alive, and Christ almighty, was it time to go to sleep yet? Bed sounded like a fantastic idea, best one in the world, actually, and he wasn't coming off the mattress for a month.

The icy trickle from the snow reached an intolerable level of chilliness and with a groan, Jesse rolled right and clambered out of the snow and back onto his feet. He'd lost his hat somewhere in the fall, his jacket had torn itself to shreds on the edge of the roof, and he had a feeling that when he took off his breastplate, there'd be a spectacular bruise forming along his collarbone and upper chest, but he hadn't been kidding when he told Hanzo the armor had an ungodly high ballistic rating.

He wasn't going to tell Hanzo that, had the sniper been more confident in his shot and had aimed three inches higher, it would definitely have cut right across his jugular. There were things, he decided, that Hanzo simply didn't need him to volunteer.

He shed his jacket, teeth chattering slightly as exhaustion continued to set in and the wet chill eagerly followed it, and pried the high velocity round off the dent it had made in his breastplate. He eyed the smashed, malformed bullet critically, then made a derisive sound and pocketed it, to add to the collection of all the bullets that failed to end his life.

He found his hat not far from the churned-up snow that had softened his fall and probably saved his neck from being broken, and was dusting it off when Hanzo skidded around the corner of the house, pale and frantic and looking absolutely destroyed.

He stopped dead, staring with wide-eyed disbelief at Jesse, and Jesse blinked back at him for a long moment before grinning faintly, setting his hat back on his head, shrugging a little and saying in his best nonchalant not-a-care-in-the-world tone, "Told you. Body armor. Everyone dead, sweetheart, or do we got some more work t'do?"

The armor probably saved him from another, even more spectacular set of bruises from the force of Hanzo's projectile arrival which, given the ropy state of his muscles, the chancy state of his balance, and his general state of bone-deep tired, carried them both over backwards into the snowbank he had just vacated. More semi-molten slush infiltrated the seams of his armor, soaking
through the very last dry threads of his shirt and jeans.

But instead of fidgeting and grumbling and trying to get Hanzo off so he didn't soak down to his bones, Jesse simply smiled and closed his eyes and gently cradled the back of Hanzo's head, where it was buried face-first into the side of his neck. "You told me I couldn't die, remember? A number of people would find it unbelievable, but I actually do know how t'follow orders when I think they're worth followin'."

Hanzo seemed to be having quite a lot of trouble finding words, though the breath was coming out of him in something short of sobs. When he finally spoke, his voice was rough with unsuppressed emotion. "A new one, then. You may never frighten me that way again."

"Oh," Jesse said airily as he tugged the ribbon out of Hanzo's hair so he could thread his fingers through the strands, couldn't help it because at the end of it all, he was still him, and he still liked flirting with danger in the stupidest ways he could think of, "I'm sure I'll come up with a dozen new ways to frighten you before the wedding. Seems to be a talent of mine."

Hanzo finally lifted his face out of the curve of his neck, eyes glittering, and captured his face between two wet, ice-cold hands. "I will accept continuous terror as the price of loving you, but you must stop joking about this immediately."

"Yessir," Jesse said with the broadest, wildest, shit-eatingest grin he had within him to dredge up at the moment, even as the shivering and chattering teeth finally started to set into his frame. "Y'wanna talk about the damage deposit instead? Because Hanzo? I don't think we're gonna get it back."
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Smut ahead.

It took Hanzo the best part of two hours to gather up and drag together the mostly-complete remains of the assault force, using one of the open-backed hover vehicles they had arrived in to aid the process -- which was, admittedly, cold, bloody, and laborious, even with the assistance of technology. Jesse had, of course, objected on the grounds that he was not the sort of man who would dump all the responsibilities of post-mass-carnage cleanup on his future spouse and the insistence had, genuinely, touched Hanzo's heart. On the other hand, during the course of the afternoon's excitement, Jesse had been shot, fallen two stories off the roof of their rental cabin, landed in a six foot deep pile of mixed fresh and hard-packed snow, he was wet from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes, and the temperature, as night began to fall, was dropping precipitately. His teeth, as he proclaimed his intent to assist, were chattering so hard that he was virtually incomprehensible and Hanzo legitimately feared that he would amputate the tip of his tongue before they were finished. When he had suggested, gently, that Jesse go inside and determine if the cabin's electrical system was recoverable and to check on Alecto's status and also make certain that his balls were not, in fact, literally turning blue, he finally acquiesced since there were useful tasks other than tending to his own well-being on the list.

The gathering process was relatively simple for both eight o'clock and four o'clock, since most of the bodies in those directions had been perforated in an assortment of ways and it even allowed him to recover some of his own spent ammunition. Those he trucked to the segment of the property on the far side of the back fence and unceremoniously dumped in a roughly stacked pile abetted by their increasingly serious states of rigor and the fact that it was rapidly becoming cold enough to simply freeze them all-but solid anyway. Twelve o'clock was a bit more tricky, since the dragons had left partial, not-very-partial, and barely-recognizable-as-once-human remains scattered throughout the forest and the slowly intensifying snowfall was burying all but the largest of them. He decided, with some regret, that counting each identifiable bit as an individual kill was probably cheating.

*I am going to have to buy this place solely to hide all the bodies.* The thought crawled through his mind as he did one last sweep through the western pine stands closest to the moribund remains of the EMP generator. It was not entirely without some appeal: the location was isolated, the house itself was demonstrably defensible and could be made more so, and it was a delightful combination of modern comforts and wild beauty and he could imagine, as he waded into the drifts beneath the pines, bringing Jesse back here in the spring, or the summer, after the wedding, and testing the durability of every piece of furniture in the place. At length.

So enamored was he of this blissful vision that he almost overlooked it: a drag trail, puddled here and there with spots of frozen blood, where someone had crawled off through the snow. They had not, as it turned out, crawled very far: the fourth EMP weapons tech lay slumped against the bole of of a pine a dozen feet away from the clearing, a scatter flechette through the meat of his left calf and a second through the right knee. He was unconscious but still alive, breathing the shallow, rapid breaths of shock, his skin cold and clammy and his lips blue around the edges with cyanosis or hypothermia or both. Hanzo was, for a moment, violently tempted to put him out of his misery:
he had, after all, come as part of the company intending to put an end to his life, that had wounded
his lover, and done an as-yet unknown amount of harm to Alecto -- but then a far more satisfying
thought than padding his own kill-count occurred to him and stayed his hand. Mercy had, in the
end, absolutely nothing to do with it.

* 

No matter how many times he thought he'd figured out what his hell on earth was, he was always
reminded he really had no clue when he had to thaw himself out from the early stages of frostbite.
He knew, logically, that the shower was just above cold, but it hit his skin like needles of lava
biting deep into his extremities. He didn't know how long he'd been standing in the shower,
gradually nudging the temperature up when the water started to feel cool, but he knew when
feeling started returning to his fingers and toes, because that's when he started sweating a blue
streak in all four of his fluent languages, and half a dozen others he only knew the really filthy
words in.

As he swore and shivered, he kept an eye on the tablet he'd brought into the bathroom with him,
where Alecto's sigil wavered and glitched while she straightened herself out. She sounded less
punch-drunk, and managed to get the electronics and power grid back up and running again, but
every so often, a truly ludicrous word would slip out in place of the one she clearly meant, and that
was worrisome, if only for how long it was taking to clear out of her code.

Eventually, he was thawed enough to have actual hot water on his skin, but he was listing badly on
his feet, swaying back and forth with the effort to remain upright, and knew he wasn't going to
manage staying in the shower much longer. Blessedly, Hanzo'd had the foresight to rent them a
place with a fully-equipped health suite, including that hot tub he'd been eyeing since day one of
their working vacation, and he didn't even care how much water he dripped through the house as he
stumbled, burrowing into a thick, large bathtowel, in the direction of heat and chairs, clutching
Alecto's tablet in still-quivering hands.

"Power has been restored to the kitchen," she said as he placed her on a table and carefully slid into
the hot tub that was, blissfully and nigh-orgasmically hot, sinking up to his neck and near melting
as the temperature seeped into his muscles and began chasing that awful chill out of his bones.
"Would you like me to begin jingling coffee?" A beat, almost embarrassed. "I meant, brewing
coffee. My apologies, Jesse. I am still a little--"

"No need to apologize, darlin'," he said, groggy and having to fight to keep his eyes open long
enough to arrange himself so he wouldn't slip under the water while unconscious. It'd be an awfully
mortifying way to die, after surviving the day they'd had. "It's that kinda day. Do me a favor an'
wake me when Hanzo's back? Or when the coffee's done. Whichever happens first."

"Of course, Jesse, I would be happy to--" The rest of her words were lost in the slurry of murmurs
as exhaustion finally slammed down hard and he drifted into the warmth, dark and dreamless.

* 

All three of the hover transports contained fully loaded medical kits -- the sort that could, in a
pinch, be used to perform field surgery and which were more than sufficient to the task of
stabilizing the prisoner for transport. Hanzo hefted him into the back of the vehicle and drove back
to the cabin because there was simply no way in any variety of hells that he was going to waste the
effort required to carry him, dragging him inside the cabin with no particular gentleness or
ceremony.

Fortunately, the air inside was discernably warmer than ambient, which argued in favor of the
survival of both Alecto and the best part of the electrical system. Also fortunately: one of the smaller bedrooms was located on the ground floor and he dragged his prisoner into it, then returned to the vehicle to retrieve the medical kits.

The prisoner's name, as turned out, was stamped on the identity tags he wore around his neck and likely embedded in the chip also included. He responded well to treatment, regaining color and safe body temperature under the influence of the low-power biotic field emitter in the largest of the cases. It also contained four high power versions of the same device but Hanzo didn't want the prisoner ("Francis") actually regaining the use of his legs and entertaining any notions of escape -- notions he put even further out of reach by injecting a significant but not life-threatening quantity of painkillers and zip-restraining him to the charmingly rustic wrought iron bedframe, turning off the emitter once he was clearly no longer in death's foyer, and locking the door using the master keys hidden in the ground floor office.

Then he went in search of Jesse.

And found him, carefully arranged chest-deep in the steaming-hot waters of the hot tub, dead asleep, said chest and shoulder and more or less every visible part of his body covered in a spectacular profusion of bruises. Alecto's tablet sat propped nearby, her icon revolving slowly in the middle of the screen. "Lady Alecto?"

"Agent Shimada." She responded, promptly, and the rush of relief at the sound of her voice was close kin to what he had felt upon finding Jesse still alive. "Power has been restored to seventy percent of household systems. I prioritized restoring water and heat over external communications for the time being."

"Entirely understandable." Hanzo assured her. "How is Jesse?"

"Commander McCree is recovering -- his core body temperature has stabilized." Alecto replied and Hanzo stared at her for a moment in wordless surprise.

"I see." He paused, considered, elected not to pursue it at this moment. "I have a prisoner sedated and restrained in the first floor bedroom nearest the stairs. If you could add him to your monitor routine, I would appreciate it greatly."

"Of course, Agent Shimada."

Hanzo crossed the handful of steps to the tub and knelt, rested his hand gently on the least-bruised bit of Jesse's shoulder, and murmured, "Beloved? Can you hear me?"

* * *

Opening his eyes was a little bit more of hell on earth, because he was nowhere near rested enough to engage on any human level with anything more sentient than a feather mattress and a warm blanket, but the second Hanzo called him from slumber, he made the effort anyway. He squinted up, knowing his smile was half fuzzy and half-goofy, and let his eye close again. "Mmph. 'Lecto was s'poseta wake me when you came back," he mumbled, and lifted one hand out of the water to slide over Hanzo's on his shoulder. "Sorry I drifted off. Shoulda been helpin'."

Hanzo pressed a kiss to his temple and that wasn't entirely terrible. "You were becoming hypothermic, my love. I would much rather have you warmer. Do you think you can stand up?"

"Only if I have to. Gimme a sec." He leaned briefly into Hanzo, temple resting against his cheek, and then shook slumber away as best he could, wrapping himself in alertness through force of
sheer, stubborn pigheaded will alone. Still, he wasn't stupid enough to attempt everything on his own, and he was more than happy to let Hanzo slide under his arm, steady him on his feet. "Next time you ask me how I feel about snow, honey," he grumbled, only a little seriously, "do me a favour and just go ahead an' shoot me in the balls then and there, cos after this, I think I'm not quite so fond of it anymore."

"A not unreasonable response, under the circumstances." Hanzo stretched out and snagged his discarded towel without unbalancing them too much. "I am, however, considering buying this place for the purposes of simplifying cleanup. As you said, I believe we can count on never seeing our damage deposit again anyway. In for a penny…"

"I seem to recall you bitchin' about more than just a penny," Jesse replied affectionately, took any sting away by kissing his temple, which turned into a much longer nuzzle. "I got some money stashed away, mostly in Canton's accounts. I'll move some around when we get clear'a this frozen hell, go halves with you. Despite the clearly unsafe roof I took a dive from, this place's kinda growin' on me. Defensible. Isolated. Modern. An' we got engaged here, so there's that."

"It does have a certain sentimental value." Hanzo rested a hand on his belly, fingers spread wide. "Can you make it up the stairs? Or should we prepare one of the rooms on the first floor?"

"I can handle stairs, especially if my choice is to collapse into a too-small bed with you. I like havin' room to stretch." Jesse wasn't entirely sure he was telling the truth there, but with Hanzo's help and a death grip on the rail managed to haul himself upstairs and into the master suite. "I hate nearly freezin' to death," he said conversationally, still a little gogglier than he liked, "mostly because I wanna hibernate right afterward."

"Then we will." Hanzo led him to the edge of the bed and helped him sit, parted from his side just long enough to fetch a fresh change of clothes, thermal night pants and a long-sleeved sleep shirt, and did most of the work of getting them onto him and the covers pulled down for him to nest under. "Lie down. I need to wash the blood of at least nineteen other people off me before I touch these sheets."

"Nineteen, huh?" Jesse burrowed into the blankets and pillows, eyes already closed again but grinning broadly. "Twenty-three. Looks like I win."

*  

The air upstairs had not yet reached a genuinely comfortable level and, outside, the storm had picked up again, the wind driving its snowy burden against the side of the house with increasing violence, hissing along the eaves and finding every available crack to whisper inside. Hanzo relaid and relit the master suite fire, limbs already growing heavy with the adrenaline crash, muscles ropy with exhaustion, and decided that Alecto could hibernate downstairs for now and their prisoner would just have to deal with the discomfort if he woke any time in the next few hours.

He considered it a matter of blind fortune rather than design that he remained upright and awake long enough to shower, to scrub the blood and sweat and grime away, and then make it back to the bed, where Jesse slept the sleep of the righteously exhausted. He considered, briefly and apathetically, the effort that would be required to find clothes and decided against it, slipping beneath heavy flannel sheets and two feather down comforters and curling him close against his lover's side. Jesse stirred slightly as he did so, half-murmuring something that wasn't quite actual words, and Hanzo soothed him back down, laying his head over his heart and his arm around his middle, tangling their legs together as best he could. He listened to no more than a handful of heartbeats, of breaths, before the warmth and the weariness dragged him down into the dark, as well.
He woke to cold -- to icy air in his lungs and wrapped close against his skin and for a moment he fought with the dark and the disorientation in his own mind, wondering if the power had failed again, certain that the fire must have burned itself out. He opened his eyes as the kiss of the first snowflakes touched his cheeks, as the wind cut through his armor, his bow in hand and the song of its string still ringing in the air. Three fresh corpses were laid out before him and this could not be right. It could not be. This moment was over, it was done, Jesse had saved his life and he --

A slow curl of serpentine laughter wound through his mind and he was in motion before it stopped, rounding the corner of the house on half-frozen legs and falling, quite literally, over the first of the bodies. For a moment, he did not recognize it, half-buried and more than half frozen, its throat neatly cut: the young, deeply foolish upstart gang leader who attempted to move into Shimada territory and whose life had been the proof of his skills to the clan, when he was fifteen. Hanzo staggered back to his feet, chips of frozen blood clinging to his armor, and took no more than a step or two before he encountered another: the shateigashira whose ambition to take the place of his father's most senior lieutenant became too much to overlook and refused to be tamed. And another: said lieutenant's eldest son, whose refusal to accept the consequences of his father's actions turned to treachery.

And another.

And another.

And another.

By the time he reached Genji, his heart was frozen with pain and fear and the sight cracked it cleanly through: the vivid-but-harmless bright green hair that their mother had loathed so completely caked rusty with dried blood, what was left of his flesh blistered and split and scorched by the heat of his dragons' lightning, ragged ends of torn muscle and shredded flesh and broken bone all that was left of his sword-arm, his legs, the victims of their fangs.

Dozens lay beyond him, the lives he had ended in the years since. The last lay where he had fallen, likely only moments ago, his blood fanned across the snow in a still-freezing arc, recognizable by his armor and the weapon lying a handful of feet away, fortunate because the sniper's bullet had removed the upper two thirds of the back of his skull and a not insubstantial portion of his face. Hanzo knelt next to the cooling corpse of his lover and felt, with the peace of perfect despair, the remains of his heart crumbling away and the knowledge of what to do next rising up to fill him. It would not be difficult. All he would, in fact, have to do was wait for the night to fall and the cold to rise and drink the strength from his limbs and pry his perfectly worthless life from his flesh. He folded himself neatly over his own legs and pressed his forehead to Jesse's blood-splashed breastplate, listened to the silence of his heart and his breath, and let the cold wash over him.

Get up, darlin'. You don't have permission ta die on me. So get on your goddamn feet, Hanzo, an' choose to live.

"Jesse?" He croaked, throat raw, and lifted his head. Snow crumbled away beneath him and light, intensely blue-white, coruscating and warmly vivid, sunset/sunrise crimson-golden washed over him where he knelt. Mizuchi and Zentatsu, coiled around one another, and the radiant creature between them, reaching out for him, to help him up. He reached out, and took it, solid and warm and real, rose and stepped into the circle of his lover's arms and woke.

His face was wet with tears, his temples throbbing, and the contents of both his chest and his head twisting around themselves. Next to him, beneath the mountain of covers, Jesse stirred and stretched and groaned pathetically as that process pulled things that were in no mood to move.
Hanzo laughed. He absolutely could not help it. It poured out of him in a torrent over which he had absolutely no influence, the tangle of emotions in it too intense for even the effort, and so he let it flow until it faded away to a final, slightly hysterical fit of giggles.

"My apologies." He finally managed to croak, after a long moment of catching his breath. "I do not actually find your pain amusing but you cannot imagine how glad I am to hear it right now."

Jesse squinted at him with one eye, half his face still buried in his pillow. "I am," he declared gruffly, though the smile belied the serious tones, "one big bruise, an' you're laughing at me. Sounds like a good start to our marriage." He closed his eye again, and the smile shifted into a dreamy state as he began his customary full-body writhe-stretch on the mattress. "Your dragons are gorgeous, by the by. Almost touched 'em, but I thought you'd yell if I did."

"You might have yelled if you did." Hanzo burrowed a hand through the covers and found one of Jesse's flanks, stroked it gently, considered. "Or perhaps not. I think they may like you."

"Mmm," Jesse rumbled, arched like a cat -- albeit an arthritic, elderly one -- into Hanzo's touch, and only whined a little as he did so. "I have reliably been told I'm adorable."

"You are." Hanzo wriggled sideways and finally encountered a night-clothed body instead of sheets and stretched his full length alongside. "I adore you. I would kill or die for you. And I would appreciate it greatly if you would hold still so I can kiss you now."

Unlike the night before, in the snow when he'd been so terribly cold, a night of thermal covers had restored his furnace-like heat to its normal levels, and the circle his arms made as they curved around Hanzo's back was toasty-warm. "I never argue with assassins who catch me off-guard in bed," he said, and obediently stopped moving. "Well," he said after a moment. "I take that back. I do. But not you. I fear your wrath more than any other."

"A wise answer, my love." Hanzo caught his face between his hands and, for a moment, simply gazed upon it, whole and safe -- his beard needed a trim and shadows still lay under his eyes but he was here and those eyes were warm and dark and full of his heart, and Hanzo kissed him, first gently, and then with more serious intent.

Jesse made a muffled noise, half enthusiastic and half pained, but his hand tightened on Hanzo's hip when he might otherwise have drawn back, conscious of Jesse's comfort. "I love you," Jesse breathed across his mouth. "And I love wakin' up to you, no matter how many bruises I got. Scared the shit outta me, Shimada, seein' you pinned down. Don't do that again. You make life worth fightin' to keep havin'."

"I will make every effort to avoid such a situation going forward." Hanzo pressed kisses to his forehead, to the curve of his cheekbones, to the angle of his jaw, to his throat. "Undress for me, beloved? Let me check your wounds."

Jesse's breath was a sharp intake, and his eyes held a familiar gleam of arousal as he eyed Hanzo appraisingly. "God I love it when you're demandin'," he said with a faint purr underlying his words, gingerly and carefully tugging one arm out of the sleeve of the thermal shirt Hanzo had dressed him in. "Gimme a hand, love. I'm stiff as all hell."

Hanzo slid his hands beneath the hem of the shirt, sliding it up Jesse's chest, gently tugging one arm free and then the other and slipping it over his head. In the wan and snowy light of early morning, the bruising looked even more spectacular than it had the night before. "No more parkour for you, beloved. I forbid it for the sake of your bones. And your limbs. And possibly your organs. Wait here."
"Why would I go anywhere?" Jesse said, definitely appreciative and more than a little verbally leering. "The view is fuckin' amazing from right where I am."

"Reprobate." His own body was not precisely devoid of aches or pains or stiffness but, since he had not nearly fallen two stories to his death, he was inclined to consider his discomfort the lesser of the two considerations. The toiletries bag was where he left it in the bathroom, and from it he extracted several necessary items, returning to bed in the closest he could manage to his usual fluid stride. "Look your fill now."

"Believe you me, darlin', I am. You'd have my attention if I were two years buried. I'd pop right up the second you walked by."

Hanzo tossed his acquisitions onto the bed and crawled after them: a jar of muscle rub, a bottle of massage lotion, and a plain cardboard box. "Pants. And lay back."

"Hell yes," Jesse said happily, and rolled onto his back from his side to push the elastic band of his sleeping pants down over his hips, hissing only slightly as the fingers of his cyber-hand scraped tender flesh above his waist. "You want to take the arm off or leave it on?"

"It may help relax that shoulder to remove it." He laid his fingers on the release latches. "May I?"

"You don't ever have to ask." And then, simply and powerfully: "I trust you."

The elbow joint sealed, the release latches let go, and Hanzo set Jesse's arm on the bedside table, well within reach in the event of an emergency. "That means more to me than you can know." He took a slightly unsteady breath and picked up the jar, extracting a double fingerful of balm and setting to work on the bruises splashed across that shoulder. "I...have not trusted myself in a very long time."

Jesse groaned softly, face scrunching a little with the pressure, for which there was unfortunately no help. "I haven't trusted anyone in a very long time, except myself," he rumbled, and his good hand lifted to briefly catch Hanzo's chin, thumb stroking through the short hairs of his beard. "You're worth it. You c'n trust me on that."

Hanzo caught his hand and pressed a kiss to his palm, then turned back to his work: the deep purple, nearly black bruises that decorated Jesse's chest beneath the point of impact on his armor, rubbing gently with his thumbs, the only slightly lighter set running down his ribs on that side, where he must have impacted with something on the way to the ground, or the ground itself. He shifted the blankets lower as he worked, exposing the iliac crests and the gentle curve of his right hip and paused.

A skull grinned up at him where none had been before -- a tattoo etched in fresh black lines, unfaded by time, flanked in ragged black wings, its eyes rough-edged coins marked with the image of an owl. The edge of a bruise longer and wider than Hanzo's hand intruded beneath it, adding to the oddity of it. "Jesse...when did you have this done?"

Jesse lifted his head off the pillow, peered at Hanzo. "When'd I have what done?" His gaze followed the line of Hanzo's arm, widened in astonishment, then grunt-whined in mild distress when his abortive rise to a half-sitting position blatantly pulled at abused muscles. "Well, where the fuck did that come from?"

"You do not know?" Hanzo asked and laid a restraining hand on his belly.

"Darlin', you've been over every inch of my body multiple times in the past few weeks." The words
were sharp, but his expression, mixed apprehension and concern, meant the sharpness was not intended for him. "It ain't like I ducked out in the middle of a firefight on a whim to get inked."

"Of course not." He pitched his voice low and soothing, caressed Jesse's thigh gently. "I assume that...nothing like this has ever happened before?"

Jesse opened his mouth, clearly to deny it...and then hesitated. A tiny frown crept in between the worry lines, uncertainty, hesitation. Suspicion. A desire to not believe whatever it was he was thinking of. "Not...to me," he said slowly, cautiously.

"But...someone you knew? That you know?"

He was silent for a long moment, tracing the line of a wing over his hip in a way that could not quite be called "disturbed", yet definitely shared kinship ties with. "Yeah," he said, so quiet he was almost inaudible.

Hanzo's hand came to rest on his own, squeezing gently. "Was it a dangerous thing?"

"More...complicated than anythin' else. Lena's..." He trailed off, looking distant for a moment, then shook himself out of it. "Saved her life. That's all I'm comfortable sayin' without talkin' to her first." A ghost of a smile. "Gotta tell her I'm gettin' married anyway. Even if tellin' her anything is technically illegal under Petras."

Hanzo smiled and took the jar back in hand, tended the bruise on his leg at least. "Would she care? That it is illegal?"

His grin then was slow, easy, a hundred percent him again. "Not a chance," he said and let himself flop back onto the pillow. "You'll like her. She's absolutely impossible to hate. She an' Genji got pretty close. They ended up in the med ward around the same time." He lifted his head. "Genji might be another one t'ask," he added after a moment. "As I recall, he gave Lena some advice about...her situation."

Jesse's calves had, miraculously, managed to escape virtually unscathed. Hanzo rested one in his lap and attended it, massaging the bunched muscle carefully at first and then with more vigor when it seemed to cause him no discomfort. "I think we should tell him together. And that we should film it for posterity."

His chuckle rumbled out on the edge of a moan of relaxation. "He knows we're together. Y'think he won't be expecting us to marry at some point?"

"Does he now?" Hanzo asked, mildly, and turned to the care of Jesse's left calf. "Have you spoken to him recently?"

"Why are we talkin' about your brother," Jesse replied, now seventy-five percent purring grumble, "when I've got your magic fingers on me?" A beat. "Fine. He called a couple days ago, just after we landed here. Wanted to know if you'd found my inner peace behind my tonsils."

For the second time in less than an hour, Hanzo found himself indulging in unrestrained, full-throated laughter. "I am so sorry, beloved." He just barely managed to not snort, his dignity owed him that much. "He is...underneath all else...still my personal pestilence."

"Oh, it ain't just you," Jesse said with a snort. "He's a meddlesome shithead and an unapologetic asshole, an' always will be." A wistful note entered his voice then, something fond and distant, fuzzy with time. "I miss him though. He always had my back. Suppose he still does, since he's the reason I met you."
"I wonder if this was not, at some level, his plan all along." Hanzo's hands travelled further up Jesse's left leg, smoothing balm into the cluster of bruises on his thigh. "When he was younger -- I remember that he was forever tending to his friends, in whatever ways he could. I cannot tell you the number of fights he picked that were not his own. Or how many matches he made among them."

Jesse sucked in a breath, bit his lip to stifle a delightful noise and shifted his hips as his cock twitched and belly spasmed. "Hanzo, sweetheart, love of my life..." he said, strained and plaintive, "your hands are way too close to my privates for a heart-to-heart about Genji fuckin' Shimada who I dearly love but don't want to associate in any way, shape or form with where your fingers're goin'."

"In all honesty, I would rather not associate him with this moment, either." Hanzo slid along the length of Jesse's body, eyes slitting in pleasure with the warmth of Jesse's skin and hands and knees keeping his weight off Jesse, mindful of the bruises and strains. He leaned down to kiss Jesse, gently at first, but at the light, teasing flick of Jesse's tongue across the line of his lips, he growled, adjusted the angle of his head and licked his way into Jesse's mouth until Jesse was moaning and panting and starting to writhe beneath him.

Desperate for air, Hanzo broke from Jesse's mouth to catch his breath, could not resist nipping over Jesse's jawline and briefly fastening his teeth in the lobe of his ear. "I," he said, a little shocked at the desire-roughened growl of his own voice, "want to fuck you, beloved. I want to be inside you, feel you around me. I want..." His voice shook, and he pressed his face into the side of Jesse's neck for a moment, trying to find the words he needed to express his desires, strange and surging in a restless ache beneath his chest. "But only if you are comfortable. I do not want to hurt you further."

For a long moment, Jesse stared up at him, and then his good hand came up to curl around Hanzo's neck, haul him down to where he could bite Hanzo's bottom lip. "Pain an' me, we're old friends," he murmured, and Hanzo shuddered violently at the slow, sharp way Jesse's mouth curled into a smile against his, at the way his body arched up against him. "Sometimes it's nice when it comes to visit."

"Mmmm." Hanzo dipped his head, tasting the tempting skin of Jesse's throat, warm and vaguely salty, licked a line to his ear. "Then I'm going to fuck you," he breathed, and his eyes closed against the sharp spike of lust when Jesse made a needy noise and let his head roll to the side, providing Hanzo better access to his throat and neck.

"I love when you're in charge," Jesse rumbled softly.

Hanzo smiled into the hollow above his collarbone, and gently laid a kiss there. "I will remember that," he murmured, then glided down Jesse's body, digging furrows in his chest hair and running his fingernails across Jesse's collar and pectorals, a little wondrous at soft shivers and purring sighs Jesse made in response. Experimentally, he suckled at Jesse's nipple, lovely and dark and tightly peaked, and felt a thrill of pleasure at the inward hiss of a sharply-drawn breath and the sudden tightness of Jesse's hand fistsing in his hair.

He took his time, laving attention on first one nipple and then the other, varying his mouth and teeth with his fingers and nails, fascinated by the nigh-wanton abandon Jesse threw himself into. He always fucked Hanzo so perfectly and enthusiastically it had never occurred to Hanzo Jesse might also revel in being taken care of himself, but now he knew the truth and he would not let himself forget again.

Jesse held nothing back, not the noises and animal sounds he made, not a single expression or twitch of his body, not the restless shifting of his hand through Hanzo's hair. It was astonishingly
arousing, to have such strength yield so willingly and with such abandon, and for a moment Hanzo did not quite know what to do with that. He remained gentle with his caresses, with his kisses, unsure of himself for perhaps the first time in a long, long time.

He moved his knee, sliding it along Jesse's leg, forgetting about the deep bruise there until Jesse abruptly reminded him with a sound, guttural and inhuman, rolled loud and shameless from his throat, pained andpleased and pleading. And in a flash, Hanzo knew exactly what he needed to do with this marvellous gift Jesse gave him.

Pain an' me are old friends, Jesse echoed again in his head, and this time he understood the wicked smile, the secretive gleam. Sometimes it's nice when it comes to visit.

Carefully, he spider-walked his fingers down to the margins of that bruise, and gently applied pressure along the edges until Jesse whimpered and shifted upward, as if trying to increase the intensity of the sensation. That's when Hanzo leaned down and bit hard on the sensitive flesh just under his jaw, and Jesse cried out and nearly came off the mattress as his back bowed.

"Is this what you want?" Hanzo asked, harsh and low, and deep somewhere inside, his dragons roared their approval.

Jesse looked at him with eyes gone lost and lust-blown, limp and languid and so humbly trusting it nearly hurt. He licked his lips, focused with what seemed like some difficulty and whispered hoarsely, "Please."

It was too much for a moment, the immensity of what it all meant, and Hanzo found himself choked and wordless. He cupped Jesse's jaw, kissed him gently, and said tenderly, "As you wish, my heart."

Time slipped away, lost somewhere in the growing attention of the dragons swirling in his soul, lost in the sounds of Jesse's pleasure and the taste of salt and flesh in his mouth as he marked Jesse over and over, perfect imprints of his teeth, wet and red and just this side of breaking the skin.

By the time he took Jesse's cock in his mouth, thick and throbbing and slick, Jesse was practically sobbing, chest heaving and sweat-dark hair clinging to his face. It was intoxicating, empowering, how readily Jesse responded, and he reveled in every noise, every moan and gasp, he drew out of Jesse's throat, every arch up to meet his mouth, how willingly and trustingly he offered himself up. Hanzo filled his hands with Jesse's objectively-perfect ass, slicked his fingers with lubricant from the box, and slid them into him. Lost more time to learning the rhythms that would keep Jesse on the edge, found that it satisfied a dark and savage urge within him to only relent when Jesse was shivering viciously, reaching down to him with a badly shaking hand, begging him in an absolutely ruined voice to fuck him now, please Hanzo, please darlin', now.

He shook nearly as badly as he allowed Jesse to drag him desperately up, wrap his legs around Hanzo's waist, and he may have shouted something in a language that was nowhere close to human as he finally slid into Jesse, fell onto him, pinned him with hands and legs and cock and mouth and fucked him fast and hard until Jesse howled and bucked and thrashed beneath him. His release crashed on him sharp and sudden, plunged him over the edge in a storm of lightning and water and howling pleasure, of dragon scales and rattling coins, where there was nothing but Jesse's arms and Jesse's legs, and Jesse's exhausted, raw-throated, pleasure-torn voice murmuring, Te amo, mi amado, mi vida, mi alma into his ear as he drifted into the soft, welcoming fog of bliss and completion.

*
Jesse let himself drift on a cloud of pure post-coital bliss for awhile, cradling a snoring Hanzo on his chest, until the sticky-sweaty-gross feeling of fluids and sweat became too much to bear. Only then did he roll Hanzo gently onto his side, shushing his half-conscious protest and outstretched hand with a promise to return in a moment, then painfully got to his feet and hobbled into the bathroom to wet a cloth and fill the portable basin with warm water from the tap.

It was a measure of how exhausted Hanzo was, when he didn't do anything more than mutter dire threats in Japanese without so much as cracking an eyelid when Jesse gently but swiftly cleaned him off before doing the same to himself. They'd have to take a shower in the morning to be truly clean, but it was good enough for government work for now.

He went back into the bathroom, emptied the bowl, tossed the used cloth onto the pile of laundry in the basket, then climbed back into bed and curled into Hanzo's chest, wrapped the one good arm around Hanzo's waist, and snuggled in. He drifted to sleep with the smell of Hanzo's hair reassuringly in his nose and a sensation of peace, like floating in a river, buoyed on the backs of dragons, settling in his soul.
Chapter 10

Hanzo woke again, for good, at some point after midday, fully shed of physical and mental exhaustion if not the pains brought on by the previous day's exertions. For a moment he simply lay with his eyes still closed, luxuriating in warmth, listening to the crackle of the wood in the fire and the much gentler hiss of the wind against the side of the house, the sound of water running in the master bath and, beneath that, his lover's voice as he sang.

_Cuando se quiere deberas_  
_Come te quiero yo a ti_

He knew, at that moment, just enough Spanish to know that was the language involved, but not enough to translate. He decided, then and there, that was going to change. Also to change: the idea that his lover would ever hesitate to ask for what he desired, in anything. He slid from beneath the covers, padded soundlessly across the room, and opened the bathroom door just enough to slip inside before the steamy warmth within could evaporate. Inside the glassed-in shower enclosure, Jesse was vaguely visible through the condensation, and he paused in his song as he realized he was no longer alone. "Darlin'? That you?"

"Who else?" Hanzo asked, and cracked open the door a hair. "May I join you?"

"But of course." It came out a purr, a sublimely _hungry_ purr, and it did things to Hanzo's heart and mind and loins that he would have thought, prior to that morning, were ten years beyond him, and was accompanied by the door opening in a gust of steam and Jesse not so much inviting as pulling him inside, pressing him back against the wet tile, kissing him breathless.

It was _delicious_, Jesse's hands warm and wet and seemingly everywhere at once, his kisses sweet and affectionate, their bodies pressed together beneath the spray and his eyes bright with his smile, absolutely radiant with joy, with such contentment it was nearly overwhelming. He could say, with absolute certainty, that no one had ever looked at him in such a way and that he had, until that moment, never believed that anyone would. He rested his face against the curve of Jesse's throat and wrapped his arms around his waist and, for a long moment, held him close.

"You are dearer to me than I ever imagined possible." He murmured and pressed a kiss to the hollow of his lover's throat. "I love you, and there is nothing you cannot ask of me."

Jesse buried his face under Hanzo's jaw and nipped his throat playfully. "I already know that," he said, grinning against his pulse point. "Why're you telling me now?"

He dug a hand into Jesse's hair, tugged it gently, brought their mouths together for a lengthy exploration. "Because I want you to know it in your bones, and in your soul, as I do. The dragons sang their joy in you, beloved."

"I don't have a clue what that means," he replied, but kept smiling contentedly as he stroked his fingers through Hanzo's hair. "Sounds like a compliment though. You goin' romantic on me, darlin'?"

"Perhaps." He pressed kisses to Jesse's face and neck and that horribly bruised shoulder. "Are you still in pain?"

Jesse started waving him off even before he'd finished asking. "Don't matter a bit," he said cheerfully. "I'm in too good a mood to start complainin' about a couple of dings and scratches."
Hanzo found his hands, quite independent of any conscious decision of his own, sliding southward from Jesse's waist and coming to rest on the perfect curves there. "Would you like me to wash your back? Your hair?"

"You know what, that sounds delightful." Jesse's voice was a lazy purr, his grin easy and slow. "I'm feelin' downright spoiled by the attention."

"I intend to make matters significantly worse." Hanzo nuzzled his throat gently. "Turn around."

"Would it be easier if I knelt?" he asked as he obediently turned, reaching up to adjust the nozzle to not direct the spray into his face as he did so. "I am somewhat taller'n you."

"Let us both." Hanzo reached for the bottles, for the cloths, and offered his lover the support of his arm. Jesse took it, though he didn't seem to require it, and let Hanzo nudge him into a sitting position before Hanzo knelt behind in the position of leverage. Hanzo poured a bit of his own shampoo into his palm, moistened his fingers with it, and began working it through his lover's hair. "May I ask you something?"

Jesse's contentment rumbled through his entire body, and he tipped his head back as Hanzo lathered his hair, cat-eyed and smiling. "Anythin'."

Hanzo breathed in calm. "Have you ever given yourself to a lover as you gave yourself to me last night?" He paused, exhaled, breathed again. "Have you ever trusted anyone enough for that?"

Jesse blinked and twisted around in surprise, displacing Hanzo's hands from his hair. He was silent for a long moment, smile fading, eyes going shadowed. "No," he finally said. "I told you before, sweetheart. I ain't ever been in love before you."

"No. No do not do that." Hanzo caught his face in one hand and kissed him gently. "That is why I wanted you to know there is nothing you cannot ask. Because I love you, and I never imagined I would love --" He stopped, breath deeply, began again. "In the world where I was raised, what we have shared together is a weakness -- an exploitable vulnerability. I was told to never accept it, or to wish for it, for it would be used against me, and if it was, I would have no defense. I do not wish to feel that is true any longer. I do not want you to feel as though you cannot ask for what you need from me, or that you should not expect to receive it. We have both been alone for so long, beloved. Do you understand?"

Jesse tilted his head curiously, though perhaps not as surprised or startled as he might have been. He had known Genji a long time, and perhaps Genji had related some of the difficulties of growing up as they had. "You're terrible at speakin' your mind plainly, darlin'," he said gently, and guided a sodden lock of hair off Hanzo's forehead and back behind his ear. "Don't look for fancy words, an' you don't need to figure out how to dance around what you mean. It's me, amado: just say what you wanna say."

"There is nothing you cannot say to me. There is nothing you cannot ask of me. Seeing the joy in you -- I would never have you be unhappy again." He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to Jesse's temple. "You are mine and I will never let you go."

Silence stretched for another eternity, and then the corners of Jesse's eyes crinkled with humour as his easy, relaxed smile returned. "Dragons," he said, fond exasperation ringing in his voice. He turned back and tilted his head again for Hanzo's attention. "No, darlin'. I've never been with anyone I felt comfortable enough to turn over full control. You're the first. You're the last. Might be a touch melodramatic, but I really ain't the kind that loves like this twice in a lifetime. You're it for me."
Hanzo gave the desired attention. "I will not let you be alone or hurt again, I promise you that. And also breakfast."

"It is the most important meal of the day," he agreed, serious as a judge, and went back to purring contentedly as Hanzo worked on his hair.

It took a little over a quarter hour more to complete the process, interspersed with slow kisses and gentle touches and soft words, and slightly longer to find clothes and to make their way downstairs to retrieve Alecto from the health suite and relocate them all to the kitchen. Jesse, he couldn't help but notice, continued to be far more physically affectionate than he had ever been, touching Hanzo often, subconsciously leaning towards him like a bloom towards the sun. It was... an immense and humbling realization to have. He was not certain he was worthy of that much trust, of that much love, or that he ever would be, but he knew that he would try to be who and what his lover needed him to be.

But for now he would settle for not burning the crepes.

*

Jesse inhaled through his nose, let the cold air sting and cleanse his sinuses, then bent his head to light his cigar before leaning his elbows on the railing of the upper deck and examining the landscape with a critical eye. The pile of corpses near the tree line was a barely-discernible hill of snow, and he only knew it was a pile of corpses because Hanzo had told him where it was. He shook his head slowly, letting the smoke from the cigar curl over his tongue before he exhaled it in a stream of grey-white, and rolled the cigar between his fingers, eyeing the burning cherry thoughtfully.

Absolute contentment still thrummed through his body, like a really good, mellow high, but reality was starting to creep back in. He straightened, made a loop around the closed border of the deck, looking carefully for any sign of the battle that had been fought less than a day ago. The majority of the bloodstains were either covered, diluted or washed away entirely by the heavy snowfall, and the melted, sooty snow left in the wake of the dragons' rampage was likewise invisible under the new drifts.

As he meandered down the exterior steps to the lower deck, he kept watch for bullet holes and particle fire marks, making careful mental notes of their location when he found them. Inasmuch as Hanzo said they'd buy the property, Jesse still intended to do as much as he could to cover the damage before they left, just in case anyone came nosing around before the sales became final. The damage wasn't too bad, and Jesse was confident he could make it a lot harder to find with relatively little trouble.

The bodies were another problem, but he had a sneaking suspicion Hanzo was already noodling solutions.

He finished his circuit and returned to the upper stories to finish his cigar, which may or may not be his last one ever smoked. Which meant he was absolutely unencumbered by any makework bullshit he could come up with, and it was time to make the difficult call. He sighed, grimaced wryly, and fished out his comm unit with suddenly-clammy hands. He'd dialled the number a couple hundred times, but never before had each number chimed like the bells of doom, ominous and loud, in his head like they did now.

He closed his eyes as the line rang through on the other end, took a deep hit from the cigar to smooth his nerves, and failed to not jump out of his boots when the ringing abruptly clicked into an open call.
It was silent for a moment, no greeting, no cheery "hello!" He'd expected that. He'd changed his contact number several times over the years, and hadn't given this one out to anyone but Hanzo. The silence stretched for an eternity, but probably only lasted ten seconds, and Jesse swallowed hard, cleared his throat.

Heard a sharp intake, a sudden shock of breath, on the other end. Smiled despite himself, wide and uncontrollable, and the anxiety and dread abruptly vanished into a flood of sweet, sheer relief. "Hey lil sis," he said, and damned if his throat wasn't choked up. "It's me."

"Oh Jesse," Lena cried, and she sounded happy and relieved and choked up herself, across the distance and tinniness of the connection. "Is that really you, luv?"

His grin broadened, started hurting his cheeks. He didn't care. "Y'want me to start tellin' you the time of day t'prove it?"

Lena laughed, her laugh, the musical happy sound that made him think of unicorns and pixies, brought her face fresh into his mind like the last time he'd seen her had been yesterday, and it ached sharp in his chest to think of how much time had gone by. "Twelve was some time ago, I'm afraid. It's now half four."

"It's high noon somewhere in the world," he chuckled, then sighed contentedly. "How've you been, darlin'? How's Em?" There was a significant pause, a tiny sound of … not pain, but unhappiness, and Jesse's face fell. "Aw hell, Lena. I'm sorry. She was lovely." He considered. "Do I need t'get my shovel?"

"Your shovel?" A beat. "Oh. Oh." And the warmth came back, just like that. "No, silly. We're on good terms. We just… weren't working out, at the end of it. We decided together that it was… better this way."

Horseshit, Jesse wanted to say, but held his tongue. Was neither the time nor the place to get riled up about it. "If you change your mind, you got my number now."

"That means the world to me, Jesse, thank you." She sniffs a little, and he could picture her wiping her eyes, suddenly wanted the ability to teleport across the continent, across the ocean, and give her his best big-brother hug. "It's good to hear from you, Jesse, don't get me wrong, but… is everything alright?"

He sighed softly through his nose, went back to considering the burning embers of his cigar as he rolled it between a finger and his thumb. "Well, that's a complicated question, darlin'," he finally said. "With a complicated answer. Y'feel like comin' to Alberta and pickin' me up?"

A long, long pause. "… I'm only saying this because I have, Jesse," she said, slow and reluctant. "But Petras…"

"Oh, fuck Petras," he snapped, a little more heated than he intended, surprising even himself. "Sorry," he grumbled, rubbing his forehead in a fruitless attempt to rub away the frustration. "But you know what, Lena, I ain't backing off that opinion. Fuck Petras. Petras tore the family apart, scattered us every which way. I abided by it for ten years--"

"We all did," she cut in softly, full of emotions too tangled and weighty to easily identify. "Jesse…"

"Ain't we suffered enough? Do I have to get married without my little sister there to keep me from gettin' cold feet and running for the hills?" It was out before he could stop it, and his eyes widened
before he had to abruptly yank the comm unit away from his ear so her squeal of delight didn't
deafen him permanently.

"Jesse! I can't believe this! Of course I'll come! Give me your co-ordinates and I'll pack my bags
now!"

Jesse chuckled and reeled them off, listened to her babble excitedly for another few minutes, and
then let her go when she decided she needed to start preparing her luggage and fuelling her private
craft now, even though he knew in all likelihood it would take her days to set everything in under-
the-radar motion.

"I will see you soon, Jesse," Lena said happily. "Oh, this is wonderful. I love you, big brother, and
I'm so glad you found someone who makes you happy!"

"Love you too, Lena. See you when you get here." Jesse ended the call and replaced his comm unit
in his pocket, and a feeling like he'd just dodged a bullet swept through him, fast and fierce. He
thought about it for a few moments, and then realized why he felt that way.

"She never asked who I was marryin'," he said aloud, in wonder that evolved into amusement. "Oh
hell, she doesn't know it's Hanzo." A laugh, wild and hearty, rose out of his chest and he gave into
the helpless laughter, laughed until he was crying. "She doesn't know it's Hanzo," he wheezed
when he was finally able to gasp for breath again. "Oh, this is gonna be a fun conversation when
she gets here… long as I can keep her from tryin' to off him on sight, that is."

Still fighting chuckles, he took a final drag off his cigar and grinned through the exhale, then
tossed the half-smoked butt out into the snow and wind, shoved his icy hand in his pocket and
went back inside, wondering if he should warn Hanzo his death was most likely approaching in the
form of a five-foot-nothing ninety-pounds-when-wet deadly whirlwind of Lena Oxton.

A part of him wanted to see the look on Hanzo's face when he puzzled out that meant Tracer, who
made hyperactive lemmings look sedate and lazy, was gunning for his ass, and that thought made
him laugh all over again.

*

It was fortunate, Hanzo thought, that Heiji Nakamura was exactly the sort of person who would
call the owner of the property he was currently renting and make an offer of purchase while he was
still occupying it -- he had the sort of bulletproof arrogance necessary to conduct such business
while gazing out across a snow-covered vista at least partially made up of frozen corpses and the
deep pockets to bump the final purchase price high enough above the last estimated value of the
property that the now-former owner agreed to cancel the rest of the winter's rental reservations and
eat the refund costs. Which was altogether fortunate because those corpses would not stay frozen
forever.

"Lady Alecto," Hanzo said, as he finished signing off on the preliminary paperwork, "Do you think
it would attract too much untoward attention to order large quantities of hydrochloric acid for
delivery?"

"Yes," Alecto replied, her tone severely repressive.

"I thought it might. Pigs would also draw entirely too much attention, though we do have a
chainsaw." He poured himself another cup of coffee and settled down next to her tablet, from
which he could sense radiations of mingled amusement and horror. "I could ask my companions to
reduce the remains to ash but we would still have to dispose of that."
"That would still be significantly less difficult." Primly -- he could almost imagine her making a little moue of distaste. "Particularly if the temperatures involved are sufficient to completely consume all the large bones."

"They will be." He sipped meditatively. "May I ask you a question, my lady?"

"Of course, Agent Shimada."

"Why do you not address Jesse as Commander McCree on a regular basis?" It was likely his imagination, but her icon seemed to freeze a bit and the silence after he spoke stretched a beat too long to be entirely natural.

"I was not aware that I had addressed him as Commander McCree." Alecto finally replied. "It was likely caused by my on-going state of cognitive disorganization after the electromagnetic pulse. If it caused any distress, I will apologize."

"I do not believe that will be necessary -- he was asleep at the time and I was not disturbed, only curious. Thank you, Lady Alecto." He made a mental note to research EMP-induced cognitive disorganization in machine intelligence.

"You are entirely welcome, Agent Shimada. Also --"

A low, pathetic moan echoed through the lower reaches of the house.

"…I believe the prisoner has regained consciousness."

*

Jesse arched an eyebrow at Hanzo, and looked back down at the prisoner hog tied to the bed, staring up at them with a face gone pinching-pain pale, angry and scared. "Y'mean to tell me you've had this… Francis… here the whole damn time and didn't think to say--" in his very best Hanzo voice, "--'there is a live enemy trussed like one of your barbecue chickens in the servants room downstairs, beloved' before you had me yowlin' like a cat in heat?"

"It seemed the less important goal at the time." Hanzo replied serenely. "Surely you agree?"

Try as he might, he couldn't think of a damned thing to say to that except, "It's tacky, Hanzo."

"Only if he heard us." His tone hardened, cooled, sharpened. "And he was far too unconscious for that."

Hanzo said that with such unassailable surety, but Jesse saw the flicker of amazed disturbance go through Francis' eyes, like someone had just told him unpleasant news and then kicked him in the balls. "Darlin', are you aware that hearin' still works while you're unconscious? He heard us. My point stands." He eyed Hanzo steadily, jaw set stubbornly. "Tacky. Shoulda given him earplugs or somethin'."

"If I concede the tacky point may we progress to the interrogation part of today's proceedings?" Hanzo asked, more exasperated than aggrieved.

"Oh, just get on with it," Jesse said, throwing up his hands in exasperation of his own. "If you're on a schedule, let's just get done and get him out of here. Company's comin'."

"Wait. Company?" Hanzo cast him a sidelong glance, which is when Jesse realized he actually hadn't told him about Lena. Oops. "Who -- no. Never mind. Later." His gaze cooled again, the
corners of his mouth planing flat, his face disturbingly empty of expression. "My colleague and I have a number of questions. The quality of your answers will determine your future. Do you understand?"

As Francis gave a tight nod and a clipped, tight-mouthed, "I understand", Jesse moved to the armchair in the corner of the room and got comfortable. This… yeah, okay. He'd kind of missed this, looking friendly and ominous in the background while someone with the kind of unimpressed expression that could shrivel balls at ten paces did the talking. And questioning. And possibly hurting. He generally wasn't too fond of this part, but for Francis, he'd make an exception.

They'd nearly killed Hanzo. Fuck them all, far as he was concerned.

"Do you know who hired you, Francis?" Hanzo's tone was as smoothly expressionless as his face, only barely rising enough to make it a question. Jesse couldn't help but admire his technique -- he himself'd been trained by Gabriel "Death Walks Among You" Reyes, and Jesse doubted he would have had a single negative thing to say about Hanzo's delivery.

Francis, bless his heart, looked briefly mulish, as though he weren't going to dignify that with an answer. Hanzo, very gently, almost idly, tapped a finger on tip of the restraint binding his wrist to the bedframe and casually ratcheted it three notches tighter. "Are you certain you wish to remain silent on this topic?"

Mulish gave way pretty damn quick after his face tightened in discomfort. "We met the contractor in Erevan -- I'm pretty sure they didn't want anybody outside the command group to know, but I saw the guy at a presser while we were getting ready to leave. If I were going to guess it'd be V-M. Got us the Russian surplus EMP generator."

Hanzo released the tension on the restraint a single slide. "Vachnadze-Melikov?"

"Yeah." A ragged breath. "Look, Like I said. Command cadre wasn't handing out more than anybody needed to know. But that'd be my educated guess."

Jesse snorted indelicately at that, drawing attention from both Hanzo and Francis. "Ain't much education required to suss that one out, so I'm not impressed. On the other hand, I am kinda curious why they thought you'd need military grade shit," he added, off-handedly, with plenty of good ol' boy aw-shucks charm. "One lil ol' person needs sixty men an' Russian surplus? Who the hell'd y'all think you were huntin'?"

"Man, I don't fuckin' know -- command thought it was overkill, too, but apparently they were fuckin' wrong." Francis, for a moment, looked legitimately pretty goddamned pathetic. "Even if this freakin' place was hardened six ways to Tuesday, but they were getting intel that there was tech in play that made overwhelming force the better option. And --" He stopped, the unspoken conclusion hanging in the air.

Jesse glanced sidelong at Hanzo, debated for a moment. In Japanese that had definitely seen more fluent days: "They knew. About me. Or her."

Hanzo's face went an impossible, disturbing degree emptier. "From where?"

"V-M passed it down while the mission group was being put together. Changed up the whole force composition, sent us the pulse weapon, very last minute." A grimace. "I wasn't even supposed to be here."

"Oh, our sympathies," Jesse replied in sweet and lethal tones that made it very, very clear Francis
actually had none. "Count your blessin's you ain't out in the pile of your coworkers in the yard. Hell, I'm still debatin' puttin' you out there."

"He has been minimally useful thus far." Hanzo replied in that same dangerously empty non-tone. "And he may yet be moreso. Would you like to be useful to me, Francis?"

Francis' rabbity little eyes flicked back to him and then to Hanzo, who gave him precisely fuck-all to work with, and then back to him. "That…really kinda depends on the definition of useful."

Jesse gave him a wide grin, full of sharp lines and bared teeth, and Francis flinched back, paling. "Trust me, Francis. Y'wanna say yes, and y'wanna say it as fast as you can. He ain't a man blessed with an overabundance of patience where assassins who came for him are concerned."

"Fuuuu…fine. Fine. Okay. Useful. I can be useful." Rabbity little Francis said at last. "What do you want me to do?"

The corners of Hanzo's mouth turned back in the world's smallest, least comforting smile, and Jesse had never loved him more.

*  

It took four days for the snowplows to actually make it as far as the bottom of the driveway and another two for the delivery specialist Hanzo called in to arrive from Calgary to take poor Francis to his just reward -- or, more specifically, to New Tbilisi and the corporate headquarters of Vachnadze-Melikov, though what happened after that point would depend rather heavily on factors outside of anyone's control. Were they even marginally reasonable, they would respond intelligently to his very polite and well-reasoned request. If not, the conflict would continue, albeit in a form significantly less favorable to their goals, having surrendered the element of surprise rather spectacularly. In any case, there would be at least a short cessation of hostilities, because he and Jesse were about to vanish again.

"A word before you go, Francis," Jesse said, quite pleasantly, and Francis hesitated, turned around slow and pale, swallowing convulsively. Hanzo arched an eyebrow at Jesse, but Jesse ignored him, focused all his attention on Francis.

"Yes?" Francis said, careful and polite.

Unease screamed up Hanzo's spine a second before it happened. Jesse made no move, made no sound, didn't even bat an eyelash. But suddenly, the colour was draining from the world, and shadows were lengthening in, and it might have been a trick of his eyes, but he thought he could see red flickering across Jesse's shoulders, through his eyes.

In hindsight, maybe he should have expected it. Jesse had been too casual and easygoing the last few days.

"Impress on your bosses," he said, and Hanzo shivered involuntarily at the unearthly echoing faintly underscoring the words, "that they really, really wanna do what my friend here is suggestin'. Cos if this continues, one of us is gonna come for you. And Francis?" The echoing deepened, and so did the shadows. "Y'all better hope he's the one who comes for you, because he'll just ruin your lives in interesting and creative and agonizing ways. Me? I'm more direct. If I come for y'all, I bury. every. last. mother. fuckin'. one'a. y'all. Nod if you understand me."

Francis, to his credit, managed to not void his bladder in fear, but his skin was an unhealthy shade of green, and it could not be good for his eyes to be that wide. "I understand," he said shakily, and...
nodded frantically to emphasize his answer.

And just like that, all the colour returned, and the shadows vanished again, and Jesse beamed brightly, pleased and smug. "Good," he said. "You have a safe trip now. And remember what I said."

"I will," Francis said, and all but bolted into the transport.

They watched from the second story sitting room as the hover truck trundled down the driveway, the slightly modified for human occupancy munitions crate containing his message strapped to the back. Even before the truck disappeared from sight, Hanzo turned to eye Jesse, then elected to put the conversation about what had happened off to a different moment. "The contractors will be arriving in two days to make certain the house has sustained no permanent damage, and to make it secure for the rest of the winter. Where would you like to go next?"

In response, Jesse reached out, snagged him around the waist and hauled him against his body before promptly putting studious effort into thoroughly exploring his mouth. "Bed," he growled with a wicked grin. "I want you to fuck me like it's the last time ever. Cos my lil sister's comin' and there might be a legitimate concern that it will be the last time ever."

Hanzo pulled back just long enough to catch his breath. "Wait -- you have a sister?"

"Mmhmm." There was something unholy about his smile, about the way his eyes crinkled. "An' I should probably warn you… She's pretty fond of Genji and actually kinda forgot to ask who I was marryin' when I called her." At last, the grin went abashed, sheepish. "Lena's … well. Not expectin' you. And pretty not fond of who she thinks you are either. So." He coughed, had the grace to look away as he reddened. "There's a slight chance she'll try to kill you. Shall we go to bed now?"

Considering that there was an absolute certainty that someone was going to try to kill them when they left Hong Kong in the first place, Hanzo found he could not be too angry about the reversal, and let Jesse tug him down the hall towards the master suite. "Bed. You menace."
Chapter 11

For the sake of our sanities and reconciling all manner of timelines (cheers, Blizz), Lena's age is between Jesse and Genji.

It was almost dusk before Jesse was willing to admit that his sister was probably not going to arrive to throttle in frustration and/or kill either of them. He did so while Hanzo was draped sleepily across his chest and belly, between his thighs, both of them languorous with pleasure, neither precisely willing to move. Jesse's hand was making a slow circuit of his spine from the small of his back to the base of his skull and it was all he could do to not arch himself into that caress.

He took inventory of Jesse's remaining bruises, having treated the worst of them over the last several days with biotic salve from their assailants' military grade medical kits, most of them fading away from purple-black to a jaundiced yellow-brown. The one on Jesse's hip was, in particular, almost gone and the lines of the new tattoo etched there more visible than ever, sharp and defined and even in the gleam of the firelight taking on a vaguely metallic cast, its shape somewhat different, no longer concealed by the depth of the bruising beneath it.

"There is more," Hanzo observed quietly, and stroked his hand over Jesse's sweat-slicked skin. "A…lantern? It is holding a lantern in its jaws."

"Mmmm?" Jesse asked, more asleep than awake or doing a reasonably convincing facsimile of it.

"The tattoo, beloved." Hanzo leaned up and kissed him gently. "Part of it was hidden beneath your injuries. It is holding a lantern, as well."

Jesse went still beneath him, his expression unnaturally flat, his eyes hooded, and a chill crawled up Hanzo's spine that was close kin to his earlier alarm -- but when Jesse spoke, his voice was soft and warm and his own. "You're worried about this, I can see."

"I am." Hanzo replied and laid his head on Jesse's chest. "I am sorry to belabor the matter, beloved."

"No, don't apologize. You got good reason." A sigh raised and lowered his chest. "We'll figure it out, I promise. And speakin' of things that need figured out…"

"I was speaking with Lady Alecto earlier about how to go about disposing of the bodies." Hanzo admitted into his lover's chest hair, a wry smile curling his mouth.

"She mentioned that t'me in passin', yeah." Fingertips danced across his tattooed shoulder and down the bicep. "Acid, darlin'? Really?"

"It was just a thought." Silver-blue radiance flickered beneath his skin, beneath Jesse's fingertips, and for a moment he caught his breath. "And there are better ways."

A low rumbling chuckle and the knot of tension in his gut eased. "What say we get ourselves cleaned up enough not to stick t'our clothes and get that done awhile?"
Hanzo groaned softly but nonetheless sat up. "Since the contractors will be coming soon, yes."
"The joys o' home ownership, sweetpea." Jesse grinned up at him. "Let's get t'work."

oOoOoOo

It was amazing how much a couple of feet of snow could change the whole world in a handful of hours, make it fresh and new with a layer of white powder. There hadn't been an over abundance of snow back where he'd grown up, though there'd been plenty of it in plenty of balls-freezing locations across the world once he'd signed on with Blackwatch, but he had never quite lost the suspicion that snow was pure magic.

Of course, that had been before his most recent dealings with the stuff. He was pretty sure he'd be shot of the notion from here on out.

Still, there was something peaceful about walking through softly drifting flakes under a deep twilight blue sky, watching his breath stream in the air, listening to his boots crunch through the top layers of powder and through the hard-packed stuff lower down.

He swore and cursed a blue streak as his foot sunk deeper than he'd expected, breaking through a patch of rotten snow and jolting to the knee in the drift. As he yanked his leg back out, he shot an absolutely filthy, envious look at Hanzo, who, he'd wager, could walk through full-scale war looking no more perturbed or off-balance than during a meditative stroll in a garden.

"I'm startin' to rethink that herd of pigs idea, darlin'," he grumbled, gingerly testing his first few steps out of the rotten patch and beating at his legs with his palms to knock loose as much of the snow as possible. "We could go back, get warm--" Tilted his head thoughtfully. "And naked. And have the pigs let loose when they arrive. Problem will solve itself by the time I thaw out again."

Hanzo's return look was cool and arch, but Jesse was pretty good at recognizing the twitch of an amused eyebrow. "The number of pigs we would need to ensure full removal of the fifty-nine bodies we have stacked on our property, beloved, is a ludicrous figure. If it's too cold for you, you may always return to the house. I won't be long."

"Uh uh," he said, shaking his head firmly. "If you're calling dragons, bet your ass I'm going to be there to see it."

He slung an arm over Hanzo's shoulders, leaned their heads together as they proceeded over the pristine snow to the edge of the tree line, and whether his luck had turned or Hanzo's nigh-supernatural grace extended to him while welded hip to hip, his feet found only firm purchase the rest of the way.

Somehow, the pile of bodies was both more impressive and less impressive than he thought it would be, and he glanced sidelong at Hanzo, as if to judge his mood. Hanzo's face was serene, one eyebrow arching delicately, so Jesse just smiled and shook his head, choosing to hold his peace as Hanzo rolled his eyes and unzipped his jacket.

It wasn't strictly necessary, but Jesse stepped behind Hanzo to help him with his jacket, manfully resisting the urge to sink teeth into the juncture of his bared neck and shoulder as they were revealed. He couldn't, however, resist letting his hand ghost down Hanzo's arm, tracing the lines of the dragon, and grinning in satisfaction when Hanzo's breath hitched.

"You are insatiable," Hanzo said primly as he stepped away, moving closer to the pile of corpses under their helpfully obscuring blanket of week-old snowfall. There, he paused and looked back
over his shoulder with one of those tiny, hint-of-wicked-thoughts curves that had every chance of turning Jesse's knees to water. "That is not a complaint."

Maybe someday, he'd stop feeling the warm wash of contentment underscored with wonder, or knee-knocking lust every time Hanzo turned his way, but he sincerely hoped not. "Thank you for the clarification, darlin'," he replied, and tucked the jacket over his arm to hold it securely. "Last thing I wanna do is give you anything to complain about."

That eyebrow arched further, the curving mouth became a smirk, and Hanzo turned away. "I will remind you of that the next time you are shot off a rooftop playing hero."

"Never gonna let that one go, are you?"

"Very unlikely." Hanzo drew in a breath and breathed out slowly. "Now, I have not done this outside the bounds of combat in a very long time. As difficult as it is, please try not to distract me."

Jesse smirked broadly. "Stayin' out of your eyeline, then," he said, and was immensely pleased when Hanzo shot him a look over his shoulder that could only be described as withering. "Yes darlin'," he said, mock-chastised. "Shuttin' up now, darlin'."

Hanzo knelt carefully in the snow and closed his eyes, and Jesse stilled into absolute silence out of respect for Hanzo's request for no distractions, counting his slow, even breaths to measure time. Somewhere around the two-hundred mark, Hanzo began speaking, his voice low and rhythmic, rising and falling in a language Jesse had just enough fluency to recognize as a dialect of Japanese without understanding a single word being chanted.

He felt it before he saw it, a shift in the pressure overhead, in the weight of the air, smelt petrichor and ozone, felt the charge of latent electricity lift the hair on the back of his neck, the chill of a winter storm sweeping off the mountains. Felt, incredibly, an answering call from somewhere deep in his chest, energizing every nerve and sharpening his awareness until the world turned diamond sharp in its clarity.

Hanzo raised his arm above his head, and his voice likewise rose in volume. Jesse's breath caught in his throat, dazzled by the sight as Hanzo began to glow, as lightning surged down his arm, charged through his skin. He fleetingly longed for his camera at that exact moment, just to capture the intensity before him, and promised himself he'd get Hanzo to teach him how to paint just so he would have a record of it.

Then the tattoos came to life and it was all Jesse could do not to fall to his knees in absolute awe-struck amazement. The pressure in his chest built again as the dragons flared in the sky, twined around each other, swelled to immensity as Hanzo continued to speak to them. As one, they turned towards the mound when Hanzo pointed, but instead of moving towards it, turned their heads towards him.

He had stepped towards them before he registered it, only recognized it when Hanzo, in the tightest, most carefully modulated tone he'd heard him use so far, said, "Jesse. Do. Not. Move."

He froze mid step, arm outstretched and eyes flicking to where Hanzo stood, white-knuckled and white-faced. "Why? Are they gonna hurt me?"

Hanzo's lips thinned an impossible bit more, and his shoulders tensed visibly further. "Their intentions are not hostile," he said reluctantly. "But I cannot say for certain that--"

He knew he should listen to Hanzo, by far and away the expert on his own dragons, but for some
reason, he was shaking his head, raising his hand further in open invitation to the immense beasts hovering in front of him, watching him steadily. "You worry too much, darlin'," he heard himself drawl, and then he had no more breath to speak because the dragons lowered their heads, and he was engulfed in the wash of their energy.

The world disappeared, narrowed down to the snow on which he stood and the dragons swirling around him in a helix of curiosity and interest, and he was suddenly aware of how very small he was, how tiny and insignificant in the face of their unfathomable strength. He did not feel threatened, or intimidated, simply small.

The pressure in his chest, the sound of his pulse in his head, rose sharply as first one dragon, and then the other, passed close enough to brush under his hand, and he sucked in a harsh breath, flooding his lungs with oxygen, and somewhere inside of him, something opened its eyes.

The dragons were as brilliant as falling stars, drenching everything in the radiance from their ephemeral bodies, but then shadows began to form, red light lining the dragons and firming their features, like they were gaining mass, becoming solid, becoming real, and the next time one of them passed beneath his hand, he felt warmth, scales, weight, life.

You are suitable. We approve.

The voices, doubled and echoing, thundered across his mind and the dragons turned away from him in unison. Hanzo appeared, hazily, on the edges of his vision as the world returned around him, and darted in just in time to slide under his arm and prevent him from toppling backwards on his ass in the snow.

"I think you're right," he croaked, and closed his eyes to lean heavily on Hanzo until the unsteadiness of his legs passed and he could trust his own limbs again. "I think they like me.

Hanzo said nothing, just held him tightly, protectively, in a fierce embrace with trembling hands.

By unspoken agreement, they decided to leave the ashes remaining after the dragons burned the corpse-pile for the snow to bury and for the spring thaws to wash away. Jesse was only marginally shaky by the time the dragons were finished and dissipated into the air, but Hanzo clung to him like he still needed the support anyway, and Jesse didn't have the heart to complain.

They walked back towards the house, crunching snow beneath their boots the only thing breaking the stillness. Jesse could feel the tension radiating from Hanzo's shoulders, no matter how many times he gently squeezed them in wordless reassurance he was still there.

"Have they ever done that before?" he asked, and Hanzo started like he'd been shot at. Jesse let his hand drop slightly, his palm spread between Hanzo's shoulder blades, and stroked down towards the small of his back soothingly.

"No," Hanzo replied after a long moment, and halted so abruptly Jesse either had to stop with him or bowl him over. "You must stop terrifying me," he said, low and urgent and intense, and reached up to grab Jesse's face between his hands. "I said I would accept the price of constant terror as fair exchange for your love, but beloved… I'm not sure how much more of it I can endure."

Jesse smiled, linked his fingers at the small of Hanzo's back and shrugged easily. "They're your dragons, darlin'," he said, and leaned his forehead against his. "They didn't eat me, and one or both of 'em said they approve of me, so far as I can tell, everything's fine." He sighed fondly and kissed Hanzo's forehead. "Maybe stop worryin' about everything is a more reasonable plan?"
"It is a plan, at least." Hanzo leaned up and pressed that smallest of kisses to the corner of his mouth. "Possibly a better one than my own."

**oOoOoOo**

The teakettle sang and Hanzo applied its contents to pot, carrying it and two mugs to the sitting room, where Jesse was stretched out on the sofa beneath two microfiber throw blankets and a third comforter liberated from the downstairs linen closet, in front of a fire that could genuinely be described as roaring. The tea caddy waited on the coffee table and the little desktop humidor Jesse used to transport his cigars, along with Lady Alecto's tablet, since she was now actively keeping watch for the arrival of their guest.

"Warm enough at last?" Hanzo asked and bent brush a brief kiss across Jesse's lips.

"Warm enough that the idea of steppin' outside for a smoke is startin' to have some appeal." Jesse replied, and stretched like a great self-satisfied cat while Hanzo poured the *kukicha* and sweetened it with the spoonful of honey that he favored.

"I think not." Lady Alecto interjected. "Under the terms of your agreement with Agent Shimada, and I quote, your victory cigar would be your last and you smoked that earlier today."

"Lady Alecto," Hanzo handed Jesse his mug and began preparing his own, "I only counted nineteen for myself."

"And I counted twenty-three." He could not, Hanzo decided, have sounded more smug if he tried.

"You are incorrect, Agent Shimada." Lady Alecto replied primly. "Your count is also twenty-three. Jesse accounted for twenty-three. The turrets under my control accounted for thirteen. One survivor."

"A tie." Hanzo ruminated on that for a moment. "I knew I should have killed him."

"Don't look at me," Jesse growled and downed the rest of his tea, "I wanted to put him out in the pile. If I knew he meant I won, I'da done it."

"Unfortunately for you both, his flight left for Tbilisi some time ago." Lady Alecto informed them, more than a trace element of amusement clearly audible in her tone. "Which means, I suppose, you both win. And also lose. It is a quandary."

"No," Jesse sighed, and sat up, shedding blankets. "No, it ain't. A deal's a deal."

"Beloved," Hanzo said and accepted the now-empty mug handed back to him, "you do not have to -"

"Yeah, I do." And, so saying, he flipped open the lid of the humidor, extracted the handful of cigars contained within it, and began feeding them to the fire. "Cause we both know you won't back down, so neither am I. We agreed on that point?"

"We are." Hanzo astonished himself with the steadiness of his own voice, despite the serpentine coil of nervous tension in his stomach, only slightly loosened by the introduction of warm tea. Stealing Jesse's spot on the couch, and his warmth and scent from the blankets, helped more, as did his return, laying his head in his lap, woodsmoke in his hair and a peaceful smile on his mouth. They abided that way for a time, nearly basking in the tranquility, every knot in his muscles and his insides slowly unravelling, his lover curled against him, and he was seriously considering suggesting that they adjust the arrangement of the furniture slightly and test the durability of the
sofa when Jesse spoke.

"Darlin', I just wanna float this idea past you..." Jesse began, and rolled to nestle his face against his stomach, nuzzling gently as he did so. "Seein' as how my li'l sis is comin' to visit, and we sorta own this place now, how d'you feel about settin' her up with her own room? All permanent and such. We can set somethin' up for Genji, too, if you want."

Despite the present state of affairs, Hanzo had rather sincere doubts about his brother's interest in spending more time in his company than absolutely necessary -- it would not, however, do to voice such things aloud. "I have no objection, beloved. She is your sister, after all." He paused, considered. "A...foster sister? Someone you remained close to from your youth?"

"Uhm." Jesse rolled back over and blinked up at him from the cradle of his own lap. "No. I didn't keep in touch with any of them." A certain look of chagrin came across his face. "I guess I should'a said it plainer, darlin'. It's Lena -- Lena Oxton. Y'know -- Tracer? Perky li'l thing? Showed up on a bunch of recruitment posters back in the day?"

"...Oh." Hanzo took a deep breath as all the tranquility and contentment precipitated out of the atmosphere and transmuted abruptly into pure and perfect dread and he remembered, belatedly, that remark, offhand and casual, that she and Genji had been in medbay together. "You --" He took a deep breath and began again. "Your family -- your entire family -- is made up of Overwatch agents."

"Yeah -- sorta?" Jesse smiled sheepishly up at him. "We all got pretty close -- ya kinda can't help it, given the work we did, and the way Jack and Gabe ran the inside show, away from the cameras."

"I...understand." Hanzo closed his eyes and behind them could see it perfectly: Jesse and Genji and their sister, Lena, whom his mind insisted was a tiny woman with too-long legs and too-big eyes, clustered together within a few years of age and forged into a family by fire -- *Lena and Genji in the medlab together*, Lena as a result of her famous accident, and Genji..."We should make ready while we can -- she will be here soon and there is so much to do yet."

"Surely, darlin', if you insist." Jesse sat up, grinning. "I think you'll like her -- she's the only other one that Jack and Gabe ever signed the papers on, which makes her my *official* kid sister, but she and Genji were like this, too." He crossed his fingers and it took all of Hanzo's strength to keep the bone-deep stab of horror off his face. "Though we might wanna put her on the far end of the hallway, just to be safe."

"I agree," Hanzo replied and congratulated himself on not-quite-fleeing up the stairs.

**oOoOoOo**

Jesse barely saw Hanzo for two days, and that was mostly in passing as his fiancé flew past him in an absolute frenzy of cleaning and preparing for Lena's arrival. He did his best to pin him down and get him to breathe normally for a few minutes, but even his best, most seductive charm couldn't convince Hanzo to sit still long enough for Jesse to unbutton his pants, let alone do anything more to settle his nerves. Coupled with his own nicotine withdrawal and sudden obsessive focus on digging through every article of clothing he had brought, trying to find a cigar he'd missed, it made for a distinctly not-fun time for anyone in the Shimada-McCree cabin.

"If I may suggest, Jesse," Alecto replied evenly, after he'd snapped one too many times at her weather updates, "you will find detox patches in the gear acquired from the Prodigy forces. One of the mercenaries had nicotine patches as well; I believe he was attempting to cease smoking. As
well, my inventory records note toothpicks packed with the kitchen supplies. Kindly use them in order to save not only your own sanity, but mine and Agent Shimada's as well?"

"Oh, what do you know? You're a goddamn computer program," he snarled, which brought him up short when his own voice registered in his ears. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, took another one. "You know what, darlin', you're right. Thank you kindly for bearin' with me."

"Of course," she said, and he winced because she still sounded miffed, but he supposed that was her right to feel after he'd been an unbearable ass. Then she sighed. "If only Agent Shimada was so easily reasoned with."

The transition from cigars to having his lung functions, sense of taste and smell and general energy levels return to human normal eased somewhat when Hanzo presented him with a small gift bag, in which he found an electronic substitute that came equipped with several bottles of flavoured fluid. Quitting smoking became a lot easier with the application of sanity-saving nicotine into his system. The fact that it tasted like chocolate was icing on the cake.

Dealing with Hanzo was a lot harder, since half the time he felt like he was chasing a ghost through his own damned home, entering the room Alecto told him Hanzo'd been in, only to find said room recently vacated. It became a game, trying to hunt and pin the elusive Shimada somewhere long enough that he could try and reason with a man from whom, clearly, reason had fled screaming.

He got tired of the game long before he found Hanzo, and having realized it could literally continue without cease forever, he adjusted his tactics. Though it was barely eight o'clock, he let Alecto know that he was heading to bed, and if she saw Hanzo could she pretty please let him know that Jesse would sleep better if Hanzo joined him? Having him in his arms settled him, he continued, loud and sweet, and kept nightmares at bay.

It was manipulative as all hell, but Jesse wasn't above it, and when Hanzo crept into their darkened room less than forty minutes after Jesse turned the lights out, he considered it an absolute victory and capitalized on it by promptly pinning Hanzo beside him, nuzzling in and hoping exhaustion did what Jesse's own greater reach and higher poundage couldn't accomplish on their own. He was gone when Jesse woke up, but he'd fallen asleep before Jesse, so Jesse was going to count that as a partial success.

The house had never looked better, but Jesse would have preferred time with his fiancé over pristine polishes and flawless feng shui.

Jesse was starting to consider all manner of enforced relaxation, and working himself up to taking inventory of what along those lines they had in stock, when Alecto announced an incoming personal transport five minutes out, and he had no more time to think about how to keep Hanzo from flying apart while waiting for Lena because Lena was here.

He was outside to meet the transport when it landed, and would have a hard time saying later if he lunged for her or she lunged for him first, but the end result was the same: Jesse laughed in full-throated delight, swung her around and crushed her in a bear hug. "It's real good to see you, darlin'," he said, and his face hurt from the broad grin he couldn't help but wear. "You haven't changed a bit."

Lena's laugh was high and just as delighted, and she popped out of Jesse's hug, rematerializing at ground level to throw her arms around his waist. "You're a lot scruffier," she said with a grin, and reached up to tug playfully on his beard. "You couldn't find a razor somewhere along the way in your fleeing international justice, luv?"
"I like the beard," he said with cheerful offendedness, pulled a hand across his whiskers. "I think it gives me a dashing look."

"It gives you the look of a vagrant," she shot back. "How your fiancé put up with it long enough to propose -- or was it be proposed to? I forgot to ask -- well, it's is beyond me."

"I'll have you know Hanzo enjoys my beard," Jesse retorted, and then heard himself speak, and winced internally as Lena stilled in shock.

"… Hanzo?" Her voice went up half an octave, took on a disbelieving quality, suspicious and uncertain. "You're marrying a man named Hanzo? Isn't that the same name as…"

In for a penny, in for a pound. He steeled himself, pasted his best aw-shucks grin on his face, and said, "Sure am, darlin'. Took me a bit by surprise too, but it works better than I thought it would. Right now, my most pressing concern is trying to figure out if I change my name to Shimada after the wedding or if I hyphenate to McCree-Shimada."

He held his breath as he watched it sink in, go from no fucking way it's just a strange coincidence through I'm going crazy and not hearing him right and straight into is he actually saying what I think he's saying. He kept smiling through the permutations, though it felt more and more strained, and braced himself when her mouth finally opened.

"Jesse McCree, are you telling me you are actually marrying Genji's brother? Are you out of your mind?"

God, he'd forgotten how loud, shrill and utterly aghast she could sound. He swallowed, shrugged and said, "Most likely am, darlin'. Don't change a damned thing though. Do me a favour and try not to murder him before dinner? He's been killin' himself with stress the last few days, and I'd rather not have him done in for real."

She glared, folded her arms and did all but tap her foot with impatience. Tense and awkward as it was right this second, it was also as familiar as his own name, and he slung an arm over her shoulder, hugged her to his side, and said, "Let's go introduce you two" in the brightest gritted-teeth tone he could muster. And if he held her just a little bit tighter than strictly necessary, it was only to keep her from doing something he was gonna regret.

She was here.

She was here and, despite his best efforts, he was absolutely not ready for her to be here. He was, at that very moment, entirely certain that he would never be ready, not for her, not for anyone, and, at some level, he was still completely amazed that he had successfully acclimated to Jesse.


He did, and he felt something closer to calm than despair settle upon him.

From down the hall, he heard voices -- Jesse, low and deep, and the sweeter, higher voice of his sister -- and poured two glasses of yuzu umeshu from the carafe warming gently in a bath of water, added a spoonful of honey to each, floated a half-round of orange coated in just a pinch of ground nutmeg on top. He placed them on a tray already bearing a plate covered in artfully arranged, paper-thin slices of winter melon and rich, nutty cheese, lifted the whole and carried it into the sitting room.
Jesse, he could not help but notice, was not permitting his sister to move further from him than an arm's-length away. "Something to drink?"

"There you are!" Jesse turned to greet him and his hand closed around his sister's elbow. "What's good, darlin'?"

"Yuzu umeshu -- plum wine, flavored with yuzu juice and honey and warmed. It is very gentle and traditional for this time of year." He set the tray on the table, breathed out, straightened. "And a light snack -- dinner may be somewhat later than usual, I am afraid."

"Oh, that sounds good!" Lena Oxton chirped, flickered out of Jesse's grip, and materialized within inches of his own person -- Hanzo physically resisted the urge to step backwards. "Jesse, you remember that time Genji got us schnookered in San Francisco at that place with the giant sushi bar?"

"How could I forget?" Jesse gave Hanzo a look that clearly begged him to Not Ask, and so he refrained. "We've got an astonishing number of stories between us that begin with the words you remember that time Genji and, well…" He grinned helplessly. "Hanzo Shimada, my dearest darlin' li'l sister, Lena Oxton. Lena, my dearest darlin', period, Hanzo Shimada. Kiss and make nice, y'all."

Hanzo did, in fact, retreat a full step and bowed deeply. "I am honored to meet the sister of my intended husband."

"Oooh. So formal." He straightened and found her grinning at him in a way that was not precisely reassuring. "Nice t'meetcha, Shimada-san. I've heard so much about you."

"Lena." Jesse began, a hint of warning in his tone, and Hanzo reminded himself that breath was more than calming it was actually necessary for life.

"I am certain that you have." Hanzo replied gravely. "My -- apologies, Jesse, Miss Oxton. The meal I am preparing is somewhat involved and many of the dishes require careful attention. I will leave you to your reunion."

And, so saying, he bowed deeply again to her, checked the urge to bow to Jesse, and retreated back to the kitchen, wishing that he actually had a door to close at his back, and lock.

oOoOoOo

Jesse sighed as Hanzo fled at dignity's top speed, then turned to eyeball Lena, likewise peering through the door, leaning backwards like she was limboing. On top of everything else, Jesse resented her spine's flexibility just a little. "I suppose," he said heavily, "that went a touch better'n I expected it might."

Lena had the grace to at least look a little abashed. Not much, but a little. "I think he'll be fine, Jess."

Jesse continued to eyeball her. "You're scarin' the shit outta him, and you know you are. And I know why you're doin' it, Lena, but for the love of Hades, could you try just a little bit? Just for me?" God, he wanted a cigar, but contented himself with a furious pull off the electronic stick Hanzo'd magicked up for him, and decided something stronger than the plum wine was at hand.

"Fine, Jesse," Lena said, soft and reluctant. "I'll try. Any notion when he'll be back?"

Jesse shrugged, crossing the room in a couple of long-legged strides and reaching up to the top shelf to fetch down the really good bourbon, then opened the cupboard to grab two tumblers. "Not
til everything is flawless, most like. He gets this way when he's stressed. Y'got time to come to grips with the notion, so get it all out of your system now."

Lena folded herself into a chair, legs tucked beneath her, and frowned. She stayed silent while Jesse poured her a couple of fingers of hooch, and then himself, and then recapped the bottle. "Cheers, Jess," she said, clinked her glass lightly against his, and took a long sip. She set the tumbler back down, tapping the ring on her thumb absently against the side as she stared thoughtfully into its contents.

Going on a decade or not, Jesse still knew how to read her moods, and sipped his bourbon slowly, waiting in silence for her to work herself up to whatever she wanted to say. Fortunately, Lena still got to that point fairly quickly, and he wasn't waiting long before her fidgeting reached critical.

"Are you fucking insane?" she blurted finally, and stared at him like he'd suddenly grown an extra head or two. "Hanzo bloody Shimada? How the hell did that even happen? Does Genji know about this? What the hell were you thinking?"

Jesse kept his expression schooled to neutral, if only to keep from grinning like a goddamn fool. "What I was thinkin'," he said after a fortifying pull from the bourbon, "was mostly along the lines of I wanna bend him over an' bang him like a screen door in a hurricane."

He totally deserved it when she reached out and punched him in the shoulder and he took her disgusted scoff in stride and a laugh as he rubbed the spot she'd nailed him with slight exaggeration. "What? Hand to God, that's what I was thinkin'."

"You are incorrigible," she said primly, and her accent went all proper and clipped just like it always did when she was annoyed with him.

He grinned around the rim of his glass and finished his drink. "Damn straight," he agreed easily, and set the now-empty tumbler in the middle of the table, next to the bottle where it'd stay until she finished her first round and they could start on the second. "Ain't that why you love me?"

"Jack told me I had to love you," Lena replied with a smirk, drained her glass and made a little aah sound of satisfaction as she slid it beside his glass and he obligingly made to pour their seconds. "He said, and I quote..." She dragged her glass back as she straightened in the chair, lifted it as she cleared her throat, and slumped into a dead-on impression of Morrison's favourite I'm sittin' here, the fuck do you want stance. Even the scowl was uncannily accurate.

"Pixie-girl," she said gruffly, and Jesse was impressed at how much she even sounded like Jack. She squinted at him, jabbed a finger in his direction and said, "Pixie-girl, I'm sorry to inform you we got you a brother for your birthday. Now, I know you wanted a pony, but Gabe got it into his head to keep that half-feral kid who followed us home last month. God knows I don't wanna do this, but I'm orderin' you to love that brother of yours, cos if you don't, you're outright screwed for horseback rides, since he's the closest thing you're gonna get to Flicka."

Jesse was helpless with laughter by the end of it, when Lena sat back, grinning widely and looking highly pleased with herself. "Well," he said, when he could form intelligible words again, albeit ones interspersed with loud guffaws and chuckles, "orders or not, I appreciate you doin' your duty to your commanding officer and extending your particular brand of torment to a scrawny lil thing like I was, especially since I never gave you horseback rides, to my recollection."

"Pure pity, I'm afraid," she said cheerfully. "Once I realized that I might actually be the only woman you ever heard I love you, Jesse from."
He snorted indelicately and smirked right back. "I'll have you know I did just fine with the ladies. Angie, Farreha and Ana all loved me."

"Tolerated, luv," she replied cheekily, with a sympathetic pat on the hand. "The word is pronounced tolerated."

"Well, joke's on you, Oxton," he shot back, and he couldn't tell if it was the booze or the fact that she was family and here spreading warmth through his chest and stomach. "As it turns out, I didn't need a lady to say 'I love you Jesse' to me."

"It might prove my point for me, actually," Lena said after a hesitation, and she let the smile fade somewhat as she eyed him consideringly. "It's as good a segue as any, I suppose," she added softly, and Jesse sighed internally. Time for the rest of this conversation to happen, he guessed. "Jesse, luv, do you know what you're doing here?"

In response, he sighed through a faint smile, set his glass back on the table and repositioned himself and his chair out from the table a little, where he took both her hands and leaned towards her. "Darlin', take a good long look at me, and you tell me if I know what I'm doin'."

He kept smiling gently, warmly, as her worried, knit-eyebrowed stare darted this way and that over his face, narrow and thoughtful. Kept holding her hands quietly as he waited. He knew she'd seen what he knew she'd find when her eyes widened slightly, she inhaled soft and sharp, and bit her lip. "Oh," she said, and her eyes softened at the corners. "Jesse, really? Is it really like that?"

"Yeah, Lena," he said, and squeezed her hands when she squeezed his. "It's like that. I'm happy, Lena. Really, really goddamn happy. And so's he."

She bit her lip again, looking uncertain. "Genji knows?"

His grin went sideways, pulling the corner of his mouth into a wry smile. "You think I'd end up anywhere near Hanzo without that trolling little shit up to his eyeballs involved in it? Course he knows. In fact, we ain't even sure this isn't exactly what he intended."

"Aw, Jess…Well, if that's what it is, okay." She smiled up at him, and he was relieved to see that last bit of wariness, agitation and suspicion leave her eyes. It didn't belong on her face anyway, because they were too dark for her usual ray-of-sunshine demeanour. "And how's the sex? Frequent, noisy and rough enough for you?"

He choked on his drink, exactly why she'd waited until he had raised it and taken a sip before opening her mouth again, and spluttered while she laughed delightedly at him. "You," he said hoarsely, after he was done coughing, "are a goddamn menace. Mind handin' me that towel on the counter behind you?"

She grinned and leaned back to snag it with the tips of two fingers in a graceful stretch that, had he not known differently, would have made him swear she had no backbone. She handed it over to him, and he wiped his mouth with it before mopping up the drink he'd spat all over the table. "Oh, do share, Jesse. I'm depressingly celibate these days, desperate for vicarious living and even though cocks aren't on my menu, I can appreciate a good aesthetic. Has he got a nice one at least?"

He choked again, hit a coughing fit, could feel himself turning furiously red, feel the mortifying hot flush flare in his cheeks and forehead, and damned himself for ducking his head like an awkward twelve-year-old avoiding eye contact at a school dance. "Every goddamn time," he grumbled, not quite as good naturally as he would have liked. "Why do you do that to me, Lena?"
"Natural talent," Lena said lightly and settled her hands around her ankles, set her chin on top of her knees. "I think it's adorable the way you blush and stammer like a wedding-night virgin whenever I say dirty words or ask you if you're getting shagged regularly." She slid a foot off her stool, extended it out and nudged him in the knee with her toes. "Don't think I haven't noticed something's wrong, Jesse," she said gently. "If it isn't your love life, it must be the other thing."

He inhaled slowly, and sighed through his nose. "I'd like to show you somethin', darlin'," he said finally, "because I ain't ashamed to admit I'm a little unnerved by it and before I jump to any sorta conclusions, or have to start explainin' certain... top secret Blackwatch lifesaving procedures an' their consequences to my fiancé, I'd really like for someone with half a clue to take a look and tell me I'm not imaginin' things."

Lena's smile faded, and her eyebrows drew in with uncomfortable concern. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Well, I'm not doin' this much fancy-footed verbal dancin' just to be cute." He sighed again, shifted to turn the appropriate hip and tugged the hem of his shirt upwards with one hand and pushed the waist of his jeans down just fraction. "Tell me I'm wrong, lil sis?"

Lena stilled, slid off the chair and leaned forward. Her soft intake of air was all the answer he needed, and he sighed in grim consternation. "Yeah," he said tightly, and tucked his shirt back in. "That's what I thought." He eyed the bottle on the table, debated taking it to keep him company on the hunt for Hanzo, use it to fortify his courage as needed, but decided the healthier option was to leave it right where it was.

Lena's hand slid over his bicep, warm and soothing and reassuring. "What do you need, luv?"

He chuckled humourlessly, shook his head slow and resigned. "To get blind stinking drunk and cheerfully forget this is a thing I need to explain to Hanzo. But that ain't really an option at the moment, so instead of doin' that, I could really just use some moral support."

"Aw, Jess," Lena said, and went on her tiptoes to hug him gently. For all her small size and the fact that her arms barely touched fingertips across the breadth of his back, he folded into it like he was the small one. "Cheer up, luv. Cavalry's here. We'll get you through it. Promise." Her chin rested on his shoulder lightly, and she went silent for a single heartbeat. Then: "Do I want to ask how you broke the pool table over there?"

oOoOoOo

The menu was, by necessity, somewhat limited by virtue of the season and the locale: the available local fish were salmon (which he knew how to deal with) and trout (which he did not), as well as shrimp in various sizes. Miss Oxton preferred a vegetarian diet but ate fish and fowl to meet the protein and caloric intake requirements necessitated by her chronal accelerator, and so he added chicken to the offerings, as well as several varieties of tofu. The local farming co-op, on the other hand, was selling an enormously high grade of produce at the farmer's market in town and he was astonished to find actual yuzu fruit among the offerings, of which he purchased two full bushels for an assortment of uses.

He was, he guessed, going to use practically every plate and bowl in the house for serving: sumashi, dashi stock enriched with mushrooms and roast wakame and gently grilled firm tofu; chawan mushi, with shrimp and chicken; sliced cucumbers and noodles in a dressing of rice vinegar and sesame oil; chilled, fried, and grilled tofu served with a variety of sauces and accompaniments; shrimp and vegetable dumplings, steamed and fried; salmon poached in miso broth; yuzu jelly atop a bed of mango sorbet. Each course was accompanied by an appropriate-to-the-season beverage,
starting with sake and ending with a choice of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate.

If I die tonight at least it will not be because I failed to meet my responsibilities as host, Hanzo thought, only a little dolefully, and began loading the plates on the kitchen hover-cart -- the dining room already being prepared with linen table cloths and artful lighting and a fire burning in that fireplace, as well.

In between one breath and the next, there was a zipping pop, and when next he looked up, Lena Oxton lounged against the counter, her glass of yuzu umeshu indolently in one hand, chin propped on her other, staring at him thoughtfully. "'Lo luv," she said with no trace of humour evident in her expression or her tone. "Shall we have a chat then?"

Hanzo successfully controlled his reflexes in such a way that he neither decorated the floor with the appetizer course nor actually threw a plate at her head with lethal accuracy. Instead, he set what he was holding down, gently edged the hover-cart to one side, and, against his better judgment, stepped away from easy access to any of the available cutlery. "As you wish, Miss Oxton."

She eyed him quietly for a moment, seemed to be enjoying herself, and finished her drink before setting the empty glass on the counter and smacking her lips in an aah of satisfaction. "That was a fantastic drink," she said, tipping two fingers his way in a gesture he assumed was some arcane form of thanks. She then resumed her chin-propped, expressionless study of him. "So. D'you want to start, or shall I?"

Hanzo sensed a trap, but could not decide if it would be better to set his own foot -- or neck -- in it or not. He could, he supposed, attempt to play innocent -- but he was completely awful at it, having parted with anything resembling innocence long ago, and no longer quite remembering what it felt like. "If you have come to steal a sample, I suggest one of the shrimp and vegetable dumplings. Jesse loves them and so I made extra. If you have come to threaten my life, feel free to do so."

He might have been awful at playing innocent, but Lena was a master of the craft, helped in no small part, no doubt, by the enormity of her eyes and the waifish pixie face. "Why do you think I'd threaten your life, Shimada-san?"

"Miss Oxton," Hanzo replied, plain and unadorned, "You know my brother."

She smiled. "Wrong answer. Genji's a big boy and can do his own threatening." Incredibly, the smile looked almost... friendly. "Besides, I maaaay have made a small call before I came down here. As I understand it, he wants all that to be left in the past and I've never been good at holding grudges, not really. It's not in my nature."

Hanzo blinked. "...Because you will kill me if I hurt Jesse?"

The smile broadened into a wink and a grin. "See, luv -- and you should really call me Lena, darling, I've never been Miss Oxton to anyone but people I don't like -- Jesse's the only family I got left. He has the world's biggest heart, and is the world's most loyal man. He has also, for some reason, decided to give that big heart and fierce loyalty of his to you. " A zip-pop, and she appeared by the dumplings, selecting one carefully before zip-popping back. "Scratch it, bruise it, so much as nudge it the wrong way," she said in a terrifyingly pleasant tone, "and I will fucking bury you alive somewhere only coyotes will hear you scream."

"Lena," Hanzo replied, carefully, "if harm comes to him through me, you will not have to bury me."

"Of course I won't have to bury you, silly," she said airily, and then the smile plummeted off her
face, like a switch flipped. "I'll enjoy burying you." With that, she took a bite of the dumpling in her hand, and made a noise of enjoyment as the smile returned to full brilliance. "Ooh, that's good. Can't wait for dinner now. Cheers, luv."

And she was gone, leaving only a high giggle that might not have been mocking or ominous, but certainly felt like both.

It took him a long moment to remember how to breathe, to coax his heart back into the place in his chest where it belonged and convince it to beat more slowly, to let his breath bring him, if not peace, at least calm. The thought crawled through his mind, and with it came something like equanimity. *I am marrying into a family full of people who are perfectly willing to kill me for any number of reasons. I suppose this is ultimately not much different from being from a family full of people who are perfectly willing to kill me for very specific reasons.* A dry smile curled his mouth. *At least some of those reasons might even be good ones.*
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Discussion of injuries and medical procedures. Some angst. Family dynamics. Etc.

Firmly into WTF territory now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jesse wasn't sure he wanted to know what prompted Lena to start dinner by bowing very deeply to Hanzo and saying, "Ojama shimashita, shiturei shimasu" because not only was that incredibly formal, it was incredibly apologetic, and Lena was generally only formally apologetic when someone was nudging her with a cattle prod to be so. And judging from the surprise on Hanzo's face, his initial instinct to just not ask seemed like the correct one.

It took less than ten minutes into what was a thoroughly delicious meal before Jesse recanted his desire to not know what Lena'd done. Because that was the moment she delicately patted her mouth with her napkin, took a long drink of wine and asked very pleasantly, "So, Hanzo. Has Jesse shown you the collection he has of all the bullets that almost killed him?"

Something very akin to dread settled alongside the miso soup in Jesse's gut as Hanzo eyed him appraisingly over the rim of his wineglass. He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring y'ain't-got-nothin'-to-worry-about-darlin' way, but was pretty sure it was more along the lines of a sickly please-don't-ask-darlin' grin.

"No," Hanzo said, settling his glass back down. "He did not. Is it very extensive?"

"Not terribly," Jesse said, trying to get ahead of the hole he knew Lena was looking forward digging him into and studiously kicking her ankle under the table like they were teenagers again. "I've had a few run-ins over the years, darlin', nothin' more."

"At least thirty," Lena replied cheerfully, artfully avoiding his kick and kicking back just as viciously. "He's been collecting them since he's sixteen, and he had three or four before Gabe and Jack signed the papers." She grinned at him as he glowered and resisted the urge to rub the forming bruise on his ankle. "I'm sure he's added a few since I last saw him, eh Jesse luv?"

"One or two," he said through gritted teeth. "I have a sixty million cred bounty on my head. A few people have tried ta claim it over the years. They didn't succeed. Stop tryin' to get me in trouble, brat."

She stuck out her tongue at him and made a rude noise as she stabbed her fork into the fish on his plate and stuffed it into her mouth. "Out of all the things I could tell him about your sordid past, luv, your collection of tiny death wishes is hardly the most terrifying."

"No," Jesse said, and reached over to steal her vegetable dumplings in retaliation, quick as a snake. "The most terrifying thing I could ever tell anyone is that you're my sister."

A low, melodic chuckle from the other end of the table pulled Jesse's attention abruptly away from Lena and onto Hanzo who, instead of looking miserable and haunted, was laughing into his
"I am trying to picture," he said, when he caught Jesse eying him, "how the two of you survived family dinners in the Morrison-Reyes household."

"Reyes-Morrison," Lena corrected with a wistful smile, setting her wineglass down. "Gabe insisted."

"We survived mostly because Gabe was goddamn terrifying," Jesse said with a smirk. "After the first coupla meals post us joinin' Overwatch, Jack also banned weapons at the table. Survival chances rose significantly after we weren't allowed to have guns ready to hand to defend our plates anymore."

"It really did help keep the paint on the walls too," Lena added, shooting Jesse a conspiratorial grin. "And the walls on the house."

"Mama's temperament really was improved by having to do fewer repairs and renovations," Jesse agreed.

"And when Mama was happy, so was Daddy. And when Daddy was happy, he gave us presents."

"So really," Jesse concluded, "a combination of implicit threat, overt bribery, and strict weapons bans enabled us to survive."

"My mother would have adored your…mother."

"The corners of Hanzo's mouth twitched uncontrollably again for a moment, and laughter danced silently in his eyes. "Her will was steel, her whim was steel, and we all transgressed against either only at our peril."

"Gabe always did have the most interesting ideas for punishment detail," Jesse said, spearing a dumpling from the serving platter. "What was it they made us do when they caught us shifaced drunk in that pub in London? The one where you nearly hooked up with that serial killer?"

Lena groaned. "Oh lord. You had to bring that up." She thought a moment, then grinned. "Gabe transferred you out of Blackwatch to Jack's direct supervision for three months, and I ended up partnered with Winston and Genji in the hopes they'd teach me discretion which, as Gabe assured me, I had never even heard of."

"You heard that right," Jesse said with an easy grin to Hanzo. "In order to learn how to be more discreet, our parents sent Lena to a giant blue superintelligent ape in flying power armor and your brother."

"Inasmuch as Genji trained with the same masters I did --" He paused, set down his fork. "Technically I suppose, at some point, he must have learned about discretion."

"The joint command of Blackwatch and Overwatch seemed to think so," Lena mused, swirling the dregs of her wine around her cup. "I'm not entirely sure what evidence they had to support such a conclusion."

"Are we entirely sure Genji wasn't supposed to learn from Winston too?" Jesse asked after a moment, and popped the last dumpling in his mouth.

"We'll ask him when we get to Tibet," Lena said, and scraped up the last of her meal with her fork. "That was divine, Hanzo. Thank you for dinner." She eyed Jesse for a moment, drained the glass of water that she had left mostly untouched beside her plate while eating, and set it back down carefully. "We should probably tell him now, before dessert, because whatever it was smelled like absolute heaven, and I'd rather have it not sour in my stomach."
Jesse sighed and finished his wine. "Suppose you're right," he replied, and caught himself before his hand could do more than twitch toward his hip and its new tattoo. "Alright, darlin'," he said, folded his hands atop the table, and met Hanzo's eyes. "Y'wanna hear about Project Avatar here, or in the den where it's more comfortable and there's readier access to booze?"

* 

The den contained not only readier access to booze, Hanzo had made a point of adding more than had existed upon their arrival: more of the yuzu umeshu, kept warm in a crockpot on the sideboard with sliced oranges for the floating, a bottle of sparkling sake sitting in a container of ice and surrounded in a selection of tiny ceramic cups, and two six packs of chuhai, also on ice, with a selection of glass longnecks from the local microbrewery. On the table was laid out a platter containing a selection of small snacks, fruit and nuts and cheese, in advance of actual dessert.

The fire had begun burning low, and so Hanzo busied himself stoking it, thinking fixedly of nothing for the few moments it took. "Would anyone like a drink?"

"I'll have whatever you're havin', darlin'," Jesse said wryly. "If I'm allowed to select for myself, I might not stop drinkin' when it's appropriate to do so."

Hanzo inclined his head in acknowledgement of that point and handed him one of the bottles of beer, selected one for himself, and offered a third to Lena, whom he was, against his better judgment and possibly contrary to sanity, already thinking of as Lena, because he was a fool, and settled on the couch. "Project Avatar?"

Lena popped the top off her bottle with the opener Jesse wordlessly held out for her, took a long swig of her beer, then set it down and started pulling up the hem of her shirt. "Project Avatar," she said carefully, rolling the material over her ribs until Hanzo could see the glittering, metallic-like tattoo of a winged helmet etched into her skin, snug against the chronal accelerator housing, "was an experimental Blackwatch program meant to save the lives of Overwatch agents when all other methods had failed."

Jesse's face was stone as he lifted his beer to his mouth, and he drank from it without saying a word, but he flexed his cybernetic hand without seeming to notice he was doing so.

Hanzo's mouth felt entirely too dry, and so he sipped, tasting nothing at all. "How experimental?"

"Lena was the second," Jesse said. "I was fourth. So about that experimental, darlin'."

"You have to understand," Lena said, letting the fabric fall from her hand and smoothing it down as she reached out to gently lay her other hand on Hanzo's shoulder, where it squeezed in what he was sure was meant to be sympathy or reassurance, "it was a last-resort extreme scenario life saving procedure. It had never been done before. Some people might say it should never have been done at all."

"I see." He did see -- could, in fact, clearly see the man they called their mother making whatever decisions were required to save the lives of those he considered his children. "And these...tattoos, for want of a better term, are the marks left behind by the use of this procedure? Why did Jesse's not appear before now?"

Jesse and Lena shared a long, long look, and then Jesse drained his beer while Lena's head went down to contemplate her bottle. "Best guess is, whoever it is—"

"Charon," Jesse cut in smoothly, neutrally, hand tight around his empty bottle.
Lena shot Jesse a look Hanzo couldn’t decipher, but didn’t comment directly. “Charon then. He probably wasn’t fully awake in Jesse,” she said, raising her eyes to meet Hanzo's with a frank gaze. "I've always had my mark, because Hermes has been awake from the start."

"I didn’t know how much of the procedure they'd had to use on me," Jesse said quietly and set his empty bottle on the table with a soft clink. "I guess now I do."

Hanzo breathed in peace and attempted to breathe out stress with no noticeable effect. "Charon, if I recall correctly, is one of the gods of the Greek underworld -- and Hermes is the messenger of those same gods." A thought crawled through his mind and he wrestled with verbalizing it for a moment, before also letting it fall from his lips. "As Alecto is a Fury, one of the goddesses of divine retribution."

Lena shot a sharp look at Jesse. "How does he know about Alecto?"

Jesse smiled wanly and pulled her tablet out from its dock, which had been moved under the table for Lena's visit at Alecto's own insistence. "Because I woke her up. I needed her t'help me keep Hanzo safe."

Lena sucked in a breath and her eyes went impossibly wide as she stared at the tablet in Jesse's hands. "Oh luv," she said softly. "What did you do? How did you do it? You must've needed to hack Gabe's credentials to bring her out of dormancy."

"Actually, Agent Oxton, that was not necessary at all." Alecto's voice, warm and smooth and even, filled the room -- she had to be using the entertainment system's speakers. "Command of Blackwatch has formally been delegated according to established parameters to Commander Jesse McCree who, as a function of his rank, possesses authority to deploy my capabilities in whatever manner he sees fit and designate his surrogates and lieutenants to do likewise."

Jesse went still, blank. Frighteningly blank. "What," he said in a voice that had no nuance of emotion whatsoever.

"What?" Lena said in a small, bare whisper, blinking rapidly as she processed, and then she actually laughed in a pitch that might have held hysteria of some kind. "Oh, Gabriel Reyes, you magnificent asshole."

"Jesse?" Hanzo set his drink aside and took Jesse's face in his hands. "Are you -- can you hear me?"

His eyes focused on Hanzo almost immediately -- a good sign. "S'funny, darlin'," he said faintly, hands sliding over Hanzo's wrists like they were keeping him from drowning. "For a second there, I thought Alecto said I was Commander of Blackwatch."

"She did, beloved." Hanzo replied, gently, and slid closer, wishing he had more pairs of hands. "She claimed to me that it was an error when she addressed you as such once before." He flicked a glance at her tablet. "Why did you do that, Lady Alecto?"

Her icon flickered slightly and, through the speakers, he could have sworn he heard a softly exasperated sigh. "One of the final requests of Commander Gabriel Reyes, before he relinquished his responsibilities, was to maintain the highest possible level of security around the final disposition of the Blackwatch chain of command, which included the credentials required to access the Blackwatch God Program Archive. If it never became necessary for Commander McCree to know of it, he was not to know. In my personal opinion, that instruction is no longer binding, given the circumstances. Charon is active -- ignorance no longer serves a defensive purpose."
Hanzo took a deep, deep breath, simultaneously impressed and appalled. "You are a God Program, then?"

"Of course I am." If she had had eyes, they would have rolled expressively. "As are my sisters and my brother and our father. Commander Reyes established the Archive to contain and protect us, and to allow us to continue our own work unmolested, under his guidance. That responsibility now belongs to Commander McCree."

Lena pulled the sake out of its ice and shoved a ceramic cup into Hanzo's hand, pouring him a heartening drink. "Hades," she said to Hanzo as she did. "Blackwatch's main AI was Hades, like Overwatch's was--is-- Athena."

Jesse, clearly trying not to cry though his eyes were swimming in tears, cleared his throat a couple of times. "How did Charon wake up, Alecto?" he asked, voice rough with emotion. "If he's been dormant since I had the arm implanted, what woke him up after all this time?"

"When I detected the EMP generator, it became necessary to activate him in order to protect you." Alecto replied evenly. "I could not remotely deactivate your cybernetics -- he was in a position to do so and has remained...semi-active since."

"That's why my arm went dead before the goddamn lights did." Jesse's head tipped down against Hanzo's wrists and his own fingers. "Are you tellin' me that, after years and years of wishin' I had Blackwatch around me t'keep myself and my loved ones alive, I've had Blackwatch around me since Reyes quit? Cos I know damned well what I want to do with that information, darlin', but I ain't so sure it's a good idea to do it."

"You are Blackwatch, Commander McCree." Alecto sounded just the slightest trace element of smug. "Any order you issue to me is, by definition, an order you are permitted to give."

A slow-crawling shiver made its way up Hanzo's spine. "So -- when you call me Agent Shimada, you mean that --"

"In the most literal way possible, yes." Now she definitely sounded smug.

"Hanzo... Tell me no." Jesse's head came up, eyes burning and jaw set in a way that always meant he was about to do something incredibly risky. His hands left Hanzo's wrists to seize his face with a grip just this side of desperate. "Tell me it's not a good idea. Tell me you'd prefer if I didn't."

"No." Hanzo leaned gently into his touch, rested one hand on his knee, and the other on his shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I want to make this Blacksite Banff," he said, soft and dangerous. "I'm thinking I want to designate you my successor so Blackwatch doesn't die. I'm thinking I want to steal Lena and have her creds reactivated for Blackwatch. I'm thinking I want to reactivate Genji. And I'm thinking it's such a good idea that's so terribly, terribly not-even-slightly-legal under the Petras Act that it has to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad idea and I'm lookin' for you to be the voice of reason on this."

"Mostly," Lena chirped, looking abruptly perky, "because he knows there's no way in hell I'd turn down an offer like that."

"I swear to Hades, darlin'. Unless you tell me no, I'm gonna make it an order and have Alecto carry it all out. So please. Tell me not to do it."

"Lady Alecto," Hanzo asked, thoughtfully. "Could you execute this order in such a way as to fully
obfuscate Heiji Nakamura's involvement with this property?"

"Yes." A pause, pregnant with a thousand possible remarks. "Easily."

"Do it." Hanzo turned his face and pressed a kiss to Jesse's palm. "Make this place safe not only for us but for your family. We will be Blackwatch together."

Jesse stared wordlessly at him for a long moment, then turned his head to Lena.

"Oh, don't give me that look, Jesse," she said, and handed him another beer. "You already know I'm not a voice of reason you want to turn to for this."

Jesse turned back to Hanzo, examined him for a long moment, searching his eyes, his face. Then he abruptly yanked Hanzo forward to claim his mouth in a searing, fierce, hard kiss that promised all manner of exciting things in the near future. "Alecto," he said hoarsely.

"Commander McCree?" she responded promptly.

"I'm promoting you. As of now, you are Blackwatch's chief AI. Reactivate Agent Shimada. Acquire and activate Agent Oxton's credentials. Promote the currently active Agent Shimada to Lieutenant Shimada, with all accordant privileges. Get the usual welcome packages ready for his orientation, and whatever you feel appropriate for his role as 2IC and logistics officer. Acquire this property for Blackwatch use. Find out what other properties and sundry equipment are still ours." A deep breath, let out slow. "Use your discretion for any and all contact with God Programs outside Blackwatch parameters. Including Athena."

"Immediately, Commander McCree." A brief pause. "It's…good to have something to do again. Thank you."

"You always scared the pants off me, Alecto," he replied with a smile that approached his normal one. "But you've always been my favorite."

"You'll forgive me if I don't tell Tisiphone and Megaera that." Dryly. "I will report as soon as my current orders are reasonably complete. Lieutenant Shimada will find his orientation packet waiting in his primary personal email account along with the instructions on credential activation. Agent Shimada has been informed of his reactivation status. I will be contacting Athena momentarily. May I suggest dessert?"

"An excellent idea." Hanzo carefully detached himself from Jesse's lap and embrace and rose. "I hope you are prepared to capture the look on my brother's face when he receives that communication, Lady Alecto."

"Oh, yes. I assure you that I am." And there was no hiding the amusement in her tone.

"Excellent."

"Ooh," Lena said with a grin that would make the most fearless person on earth tremble with unease. "Don't forget to capture the one where he realizes Hanzo outranks him too. That'll definitely be one for the new family photo album."

Hanzo decided then and there that, no matter how foolish it was given her very recent – and mostly valid – threats to his life, he liked Lena very much.

*
They left the newly christened Blacksite Banff early the next morning, before the sun was even properly up. Jesse wasn't entirely sure how much sleep Hanzo was running on, because whatever Alecto had given him in his orientation packet had left him frisky as all hell. He had spent the majority of the night telling Jesse to keep quiet, Lena is just down the hall, don't want to wake her up, do we? while simultaneously doing his best to drive Jesse out of his fucking mind with pleasure, and he'd been the one to wake Jesse out of his post-coital coma with piping hot coffee and no sign he'd slept at all.

He wore the serape while loading all the irreplaceables Hanzo didn't feel like leaving behind into the tiny cargo area of Lena's four-seater transport out of sheer spite. He regretted it only a little when a draft breezed right under it, bypassing its weather-responsive linings altogether.

He accepted his thermos of coffee from a very smug Hanzo with equanimity and definitely not a scowl that tried to turn him to a scorch mark on the spot, and huddled in his flight chair while he warmed back up again.

"Right then, luvs," Lena said some twenty minutes into the flight, flipping on the autopilot and spinning around as far as her seat would go. Her grin was bright, wide, everything he'd missed about his sister, in fact, and that warmed him more than the coffee. "We've got about six hours to our first brief stop for food and leg-stretching and the like, and the autopilot's going to handle most of it. I don't suppose anyone brought a board game to kill the time, did they?"

"I found something…interesting…among the documents that Lady Alecto sent me last night," Hanzo replied, in that serenely meditative tone that Jesse was beginning to recognize as the world's biggest con job, danger sign, and indicator of elder Shimada shenanigans, not that he'd ever admit it out loud, possibly not even under torture. Hanzo slid his tablet out of its little storage slot, opened a file and, quite probably just for effect, punched it into full holographic display.

It was a romance novel cover. An extremely familiar romance novel cover, if he was going to admit the truth, featuring a well-muscled young back (bare, tanned) and a similarly endowed ass (kilted), with a winsome, waifish young maiden clad in something improbably diaphanous and a mess of red hair plastered to his washboard abs along with the chest hair that might, just might, have been sculpted according to Genji Shimada Aesthetics.

Oh hell.

"There is," Hanzo continued in that same tone, "a standing order indicating that all extant physical copies of this book are to be acquired at any reasonable cost and remanded to Blackwatch command immediately. Dare I ask why?"

If Hanzo thought he'd catch Jesse off-guard, embarrass him or anything else, he was going to be sorely disappointed. Without batting an eyelash, Jesse shrugged as if he didn't have the slightest idea and said, as Lena cackled helplessly beside them, "Could be Mama had a secret love for Highlander bodice-rippers, darlin'. Blackwatch was known for being terribly corrupt, after all. Usin' its resources to ensure no one else could read it woulda been in line with that."

"Is that really the story you're going with, Jesse luv?" Lena asked through tears of laughter.

Jesse grinned. "It's a better one than I was drunk and so were you and Genji had a camera and Angie had a friend who wanted a cover for her romance novel."

"I don't know what caused Gabe more stress migraines," Lena said, pulling her knees up to rest her chin on them. "The romance covers, or the billboards."
"Definitely the billboards," Jesse said without hesitation. "The romance covers, he could order acquisitions to obtain. The billboards he couldn't do a damn thing about." Before Hanzo could do more than look curious about what billboards, Jesse hastily turned the conversation to something less volatile and dangerous than his modelling career in his misspent youth. "Y’know, we never did get around to finishin’ that conversation about Project Avatar. We let Alecto derail us pretty thoroughly."

The smile fell off Lena’s face and Hanzo’s mock serenity disappeared just as quickly. “I suppose we did, beloved,” he murmured, and Jesse almost regretted putting that worry back on his face. Almost. “I suppose I did not wish to ask, and neither of you wished to elaborate.” He took a deep breath, his breathing-in-peace as Jesse knew it, but it didn’t look much like his exhale was breathing-out-stress it was supposed to. “Alecto sent me detailed files on this and several other Blackwatch operations but I … could not bring myself to open it last night.” He sighed, faintly. “What else do you need to tell me about it? Do I need to ask the most obvious question about why it was named Project Avatar, or will you tell me without the need for prompting?”

Lena shot a look at Jesse, one he had no trouble reading as flat dread and more than a little uncertainty. He swallowed, girded his loins and said quite firmly, “Barrin’ Angie being here to go into details, I think Alecto is the next most qualified to speak on the topic. Alecto, be a dear and give us a rundown of Project Avatar, wouldja?”

“Of course, Commander McCree.” If Alecto felt any of the wry exasperation that filled the also-somewhat-impressed eyeroll Lena shot him, it wasn’t evident in her smooth, professional tones. “If I may borrow your personal device for my presentation, Lieutenant Shimada?”

“Of course, lady Alecto.” Hanzo’s voice had gone cool and polite, which was not a good sign for his state of mind. Jesse tentatively held out his hand, and tried not to let the flood of relief show when Hanzo accepted it in a tight grip. Good. Not so far gone as that, then.

“Commander McCree is correct in his assessment that Doctor Zeigler would be the best authority to brief you on the foundational parameters of Overwatch’s, and thus Blackwatch’s, experimental medical protocols, but the intricacies of establishing secured communications with Doctor Zeigler in a timely fashion render that option impractical at present. Therefore, as authorized by Blackwatch Commander McCree, I will endeavor to educate those present in her stead, to the best of my operational ability.”

The tablet’s holoprojection flickered slightly as Alecto opened multiple files, fanned the screens across the inside of the crew cabin, text and video alike.

"The precise genesis of Project Avatar lies in the realm of experimental medical necessity occasioned by extraordinary circumstances." Alecto's voice filled the cabin, pitched at a soothing register. "Dr. Angela Ziegler and Dr. Winston, both members of Overwatch’s Medical and Science Divisions as well as situational field operatives, were responsible for its conceptualization, development, and implementation. More precisely, Dr. Ziegler, code designate Mercy, nearly killed herself during the practical testing phase of her Valkyrie power armor/mobile biotic medical unit suit."

A clip of video played and Jesse's own grip tightened on Hanzo's hand and he turned his head away, because, no matter how many times he watched it, it never got easier to see. He could still hear it though: the sudden arcs of power as the armor's surge protection failed under stress, surfaces heating to all-but-molten in a heartbeat, the wing assembly shattering completely as she hit the laboratory floor, her screams ringing off the walls.

"Fortunately, Dr. Ziegler's biotic medicine protocols were sufficiently well-developed by this time
that they were available to use on her without her direct supervision." Dryly. "The extent of her injuries required the injection of three separate therapeutic nanocolonies, each tasked with a dedicated care regimen. She was, according to her own testimony on the topic, primarily unconscious during the process and heavily sedated due to the extent of her injuries. During it, however, she was...approached."

The screen flickered again, an icon in shining gold: a laurel wreath, radiant solar disk between the tips.

"Not all of the God Programs were anchored to a single place, a single residence of their core consciousness. Some were vagrants, released into the global information network and existing in disembodied, widely disseminated states of being, aware of the world but only dubiously able to effect it. One of these God Programs, designated Apollo, had followed Dr. Ziegler's career with interest, guided it when he could, and, as she lay recovering from her injuries, approached her directly for the first time by interfacing with her nanocolonies." A pause. "No direct recording exists of this conversation but, under Apollo's direct control, the nanobiotic colonies successfully repaired Dr. Ziegler's injuries more fully and completely than was considered possible at the time."

"Who --" Hanzo began, only to be cut off.

"No one – not even I – knows who released us, or why us and not the God Programs that remained anchored in the Omnia," Alecto replied. "Apollo chose Dr. Ziegler due, in large part, for her ferocious respect for all human life, her absolute dedication to the arts of healing, and her desire to protect the innocent from harm. She thus became the first Avatar. He assisted her in the full development of her armor as a delivery vehicle for emergency medicine in the field, including the eventual discovery of how to successfully power it without a physically-resident God Program, among other projects." A pause. "There may, in fact, be other God Programs who were released, who did not survive intact enough to make contact, or who have not elected to do so for their own reasons."

“We chased all sorts of rogues all over the place,” Jesse said, and Lena nodded slowly. “Not all of ‘em came hard. Some of ‘em just needed a better option. S’why Gabe put the Archive in place. S’why Jack trusted Athena.”

"Yes," Alecto agreed, quietly. "Athena was induced to reach out to Dr. Winston shortly thereafter, once it became clear that Dr. Ziegler's union with Apollo was a successful and fruitful one, and that the leaders of Overwatch and Blackwatch would not respond with automatic hostility towards us when we offered no threat to humanity. It was...a matter of some concern, given their direct involvement in the resolution of the Omnic Crisis, and the ongoing threat of Omnic extremists."

"Athena technically has a body of her own, but it ain't a human one," Jesse interjected. "It's an advanced humanoid Omnic model, Diplomat class. She just doesn't use it all that much."

"Hermes joined us during the process of recovering Agent Oxton after the accident involving the Slipstream experimental aircraft." Alecto added smoothly. "Dr. Winston's conceptualization of the chronal accelerator was fundamentally sound and excellent engineering design but it required the advanced perceptive capabilities of a God Program to achieve its desired function: keeping Agent Oxton properly oriented and anchored in time and space while using the abilities the accident granted her as a controllable weapon." Another, somewhat lengthier pause. "Commander McCree's modification occurred after critical injury in the field."

Jesse felt his bones creak under the renewed force of Hanzo's grip. "Jesse?"

"It was just a little explosion, darlin'," he replied soothingly, to no particular effect.
One of Alecto's subscreens flickered, bits of video from six different POV field cameras. It was *not* a little explosion. It was, in fact, a pretty goddamn *big* explosion, though oddly not quite as big as he remembered it being. While it was yet another one of those things he could happily go the rest of his life without ever witnessing again, it was definitely the one thing above all other things he’d hoped *Hanzo* would go without ever seeing at all. Mostly because it showed in fairly graphic detail exactly how many bits and pieces his arm blew into and exactly how far they scattered across the landscape.

"Traitor," Jesse muttered at her and she didn't have the decency to even sound contrite about it.

"Commander McCree suffered severe injuries related to the unplanned detonation of a stockpile of pulse munitions during an interdiction operation targeting arms smugglers." Perfectly even. "Including the partial dismemberment injury that was eventually corrected via cybernetics. He nearly bled to death, both because of that injury and also multiple overpressure shock and shrapnel related internal injuries, and would have done so had Commander Reyes not required the field medic assigned to the team to conduct an emergency blood transfusion, contravening several standing orders regarding the prevention of exposure to secondary Soldier Enhancement Program related physiological alterations. Once the team arrived in Watchpoint Bogota, they were able to inject him with the therapeutic nanocolonies that eventually hosted Charon – who, poetically speaking, walked him back from the banks of the River Styx and almost immediately lapsed into a state of near-total dormancy."

“No, luv,” Lena said and took his other hand with a sympathetic pat on his arm. “Once they’re awake, they… extract themselves, I suppose, spread throughout the nanites in our bodies. If a God Program goes active in its Avatar…” She shakes her head slowly. “It’s not really so bad, you know. Hermes is an alright sort. He can be a bit of a chatterbox from time to time, but we get on well.”
“It has always been the tentative belief of Doctor Zeigler that any incompatibility between the human Avatar and the hosted God Program would result in implantation failure and death of both individuals,” Alecto said. “There is a reason this procedure is still highly experimental and has not been performed since Commander McCree’s implantation.”

“Were there deaths?” Hanzo asked very quietly, like he didn’t want to know the answer.

“No,” Alecto replied. “But the sample group from which to compile data is very small. No conclusive evidence could be drawn from the four recorded, and successful, Avatar procedures, simply supposition and hypothesis.”

Don’t ask, Jesse thought fiercely as he watched Hanzo process that information, look at Lena, look at him with conclusions forming. Watched him open his mouth. For the love of Hades, darlin’, don’t ask because if you ask, I’ll hafta answer and I’m not sure you’ll like it much.

“You said Lena was the second to undergo this procedure,” Hanzo said carefully, thoughtfully frowning, and Jesse’s heart sank through his stomach because he was asking. “Mercy was the first. And you were the fourth.” A beat. “Dare I ask who was third?”

Jesse closed his eyes, and swallowed hard. “Third was Genji.”

Hanzo sucked in a deep breath. “My brother is—”

“Ask him,” Lena cut in softly. “You’ll have to ask him because it wasn’t the same as us. Tombo… Just ask Genji when you see him. He’ll tell you, if he wants to tell you.”

“I will,” Hanzo said just as softly, and fell silent.

No one felt much like speaking after all that, and eventually Jesse caved to his exhaustion, drifting into an uneasy doze, coiled tight around Hanzo’s silent, still form. His dreams were hazy things full of deep, black rivers, the distant roars of dragons, and a red-eyed shadow with an easy grin and the scent of cigar smoke surrounding it.

*

"You realize," Venera Melikov said, in the sort of low, even tone that boded well for absolutely no one and nothing, "that at this juncture it would have been less expensive to simply allow Irina to divorce your idiot grandson and make her silence on the matter of his indiscretions part of the decree, even with the prenuptial agreement?"

"He was your grandson, too," Gyorg Vachnadze replied, waspishly. "And, yes, I know that. What I do not know is how the rest of the family will respond to this. Not to mention our partner." He spat the word as though it were both hot and poisonous. "Hektor received a report from Prodigy this morning. He is demanding a meeting of the board of directors."

Frozen on the screen before them was the image of the assassin whose poison had killed their grandson, immaculate, smiling slightly, and on each of their tablets a selection of the information he had gathered, evidently during the course of his preparations, the release of which, in whole or in part, encompassed the ruination of decades of work, of everything they had built together. The release which he had promised to execute, should they continue to trouble his peace.

"Contact the Shimada woman," Venera finally growled. "We will see what she can offer to make the continuance of this vendetta worthwhile."
Chapter End Notes

For the curious:

Original crack!headcanon re: romance novel covers - here
Victor's Secret Billboards discussion here - kilted-mccree-stock-photos
And the original seed idea of Victor's Secret Billboards - here
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes


"Civilian aircraft Golf-Mike-Romeo-Sierra-November requesting vectors, Shambali flight control." Lena, he could not help but notice, sounded tired – the documentation that Lady Alecto had provided suggested strongly that, on a flight of this duration, a backup pilot was required by standard regulations and made a mental note to determine what the certification requirements would be. "Thank you, Shambali flight control. Adjusting course, ETA twenty minutes." She keyed off her mic and looked back over her shoulder. "They'll have a reception committee waiting for us on the platform. Wake up Jesse for me, luv?"

"Certainly." Hanzo closed down his tablet and tucked it away in his carry-on, folded the blanket he himself had been huddling under, and rested a hand on Jesse's arm – itself hidden beneath three layers of blankets, his heavy winter jacket and that serape and he made another mental note to book someplace impressively warm for the site of the honeymoon. "Beloved, we are nearly to the monastery."

Jesse woke slowly, too slowly, and it took too long for his eyes to focus, for awareness to flood back into them. For Hanzo to convince himself the red tinge was a trick of the light. “Timeszt, N’zo?” he mumbled, yawning and stretching until something in his back crackled. “Oof. S’what I get for sleepin’ in one of these seats. Too damn old to do that anymore.”

"Very late," Hanzo replied and tried to focus more on how dry his voice sounded and how weary still, and not that hint of crimson, unhooking a squeeze bottle of water from the back of the co-pilot seat and handing it to him. "Or very early, depending upon one's point of view."

Jesse accepted the water, sat up straighter, came a little more awake. He declined answering for the time it took to gulp down the entire bottle, though he kept Hanzo in the corner of his vision as he did so. By the time he lowered the empty bottle to catch his breath, the crimson highlighting had faded entirely, leaving his eyes warm brown again. “Gotta be above seven thousand feet,” he said, still a little raspy. “I feel like I’ve been deep-throating sandpaper.”

"Seven thousand fifty!" sang Lena from the pilot's seat. "On approach. If you look out the windows to your left and your right, you will see the peaks of the Langtang Himal and just ahead of us are the guidance lights for the Shambali monastery landing platform." She keyed the mic again. "We see you, Shambali flight control."

The plane was, fortunately, a VTOL-capable vehicle and Lena clearly an expert at landing precisely in tight spaces, as she maneuvered the last handful of meters with a sheer cliff wall to right and a sharp drop into empty space on the other.

“They’ve gotten more visitor-friendly since last time I was here,” Jesse remarked, craning his neck to peer around Lena. “Expanded the landing area quite a bit.” He shot a look over his shoulder at Hanzo, apparently feeling the need to elaborate. “I came t’visit Genji once, just after he settled in here.” He grinned faintly. “Didn’t stay long. Couldn’t breathe too well.”
Hanzo added *determine symptoms of altitude sickness* to his internal task-list. "Are you having trouble now?"

"Nah. Six or eight hours might be a different story. Ask me then."

"I shall." He tried to make that sound more like a promise and less like a threat with likely only middling success from the look that crossed Jesse's face. He took Jesse's carryon by way of apology and offered him an arm to lean on as they disembarked, his own back and legs twinging in a way that forced him to remember that he was no younger.

Lena zipped ahead of them both to greet the small party of monks coming to meet them. She was chattering away happily with the leader of the group as he and Jesse reached them. "Brother Dszatta, you might remember Jesse from his last visit..." Jesse reached up and touched the brim of his hat in greeting, a slightly rueful smile curling his mouth. "...And this is Hanzo Shimada." The slightest of hummingbird pauses. "Genji's brother."

To give the monks the credit they deserved, they absorbed that information with no visible reaction – not that many of them had faceplates mobile enough to allow for a change in expression, but even Omnics had body language. These did not appear to be inclined to greet his arrival by ejecting him over the edge of the landing platform and, as the wind rose and scoured the face of the mountain, Brother Dszatta stepped forward and spread his hands in greeting. "Travelers are always welcome within the walls of our home. Enter into the peace of the Iris."

The traveler's hostel was, at that moment, mostly empty but for two or three new postulants who, as the monks explained, had not yet committed themselves fully. It was likewise thankfully absent of tourists, who generally elected not to risk being snowed in on the top of a Nepalese mountain in December. Dszatta himself showed them to their door, remarking on how tired they must be after such a long journey and advising they take the opportunity to rest for a few hours before the evening meal, a suggestion to which Jesse readily agreed and Hanzo could find no fault in likewise agreeing to.

The room was small, the majority of the space taken up by the simple but adequate furniture the monks provided, and were shortly rendered warmer by the inclusion of a high efficiency space heater and a mountain of heavy sheets and blankets. Hanzo gently shoved Jesse into their room's sole chair, made up both the single beds, and then pushed them together to form a close but cozy nest to sleep in. There were other things he suspected he should be doing but his mind refused to settle on any single one of them as he surveyed the results of his labors and turned to his lover, watching him with the very faintest hint of a smile on his lips. He gave the covers one last twitch and took the two strides needed to bring himself into arm's reach, resting a hand on Jesse's shoulder as he did so.

Jesse slung his arm around Hanzo's waist and tugged him down into his lap, smoothing his hands comfortably up his spine. "You're nervous," he said, and it wasn't a question. "It's gonna go fine, darlin'. You'll be happy to see him, he'll be happy to see you, he throws you off the mountaintop and I'll pitch his ass right off after yours. Lena will catch y'all with her plane, and we'll laugh about it tomorrow." A hand curled around the back of his neck, tugging gently until Jesse could fit his mouth to Hanzo's, where he murmured, "Let me take your mind off it, sweetheart, just for a few minutes."

Now that he had nothing else to think about or concentrate on, Hanzo was, in fact, rather poignantly aware of the precise number and quality of knots his stomach was tied in. "I am. And I know." He rested his face alongside Jesse's for a moment. "If anyone has a right to apprehension it is Genji – I shot first, last time, after all." He drew back, pressed a soft kiss to one corner of his
lover's mouth, and then the other. "I would...welcome not thinking. For more than a few minutes."

Jesse’s grin curled slow and delicious and he gently nipped Hanzo’s chin before tipping his head up with a nudge from his nose. “Your wish is my command, darlin’,;” he said, and slid one arm around the back of his head, the other around his waist, and held him securely against him as he licked and nibbled his way to his favorite spot just under Hanzo’s earlobe, slowly and thoroughly.

The breath caught in his lungs and his hand found its way into Jesse's hair and his eyes slid closed at that warm, sure touch. "Yes."

Jesse growled low in his throat, manhandled him more securely to straddle his lap instead of sitting sideways, and rocked up against him with swiftly hardening arousal as his teeth scraped flesh. “Never get tired of your little sighs,” he groaned, “or what they do to me.”

Hanzo's fingers found the top button of Jesse's shirt even as his lips brushed the shell of his ear. "I love you." It still amazed him, at points, to speak those words aloud – now was one of those times, as he slid the last of the space from between them, rocking down slowly. "I will always. And... I need you."

Jesse’s breath was harsh and ragged beside his ear. “I love you too, Hanzo. Ain’t nothin’ changin’ that.” A sharp, playful bite, just under his jawline. “D’you want me to fuck you?”

Hanzo traced the tip of his tongue around the rim of his lover's ear. "I want to feel your skin against mine. I want to taste your sweat and drink your laughter. I want you however you would have me."

In a surge of energy, Jesse pushed himself to a standing position, hands sliding down to support Hanzo’s ass, and elbows nudging his thighs to wrap around his waist. “Darlin’,” he said, low and promising, and started walking them towards the nest Hanzo’d made “I’d have you with a ring on your finger and in bed beside me every mornin’. The specifics of how we’re configured on any particular day don’t matter to me.”

"Take me," Hanzo growled against his ear, tightening the grip he had with his thighs and his hands in Jesse's hair. "Now."

“Then help me,” Jesse growled back, letting go with one hand to worm it between their bodies in search of buttons, “take your damned pants off.”

In short order, though he could not give specific details on the how, they were nude and Jesse was reaching for him with eager hands, pulling him down onto the mound of sheets and blankets, mouth hot and wet and seemingly everywhere as he seized Hanzo’s hips and slid his hard, twitching length between Hanzo’s thighs. “I,” he rasped, “am always gonna need you, darlin’. Always gonna want you.”

Hanzo caught his face between his hands and his mouth in a breath-stealing kiss. "And I will always belong to you. Nothing will change that." A hand slid down Jesse's back, his thighs parted wider, inviting. "Please, my love."

Jesse arched gorgeously beneath him as he positioned himself and half pushed up, half pulled Hanzo down onto him with a groan of sheer bliss, rocking his way slowly in until he was fully sheathed. “You’re the world’s pushiest bottom, you know that?” he said with a lazy smile, running his hands up Hanzo’s sides and down his chest and abdomen, where cool, metal fingers settled over his hip and warm, pliant fingers wrapped around his erection.
"I have been told that, yes. By you." The stretch and burn was perfect and Hanzo allowed his mind to slide away from thought, from worry, and gave himself over to it, the reality of his lover inside him, his lover's hands on him, dug his own fingers into the curls decorating Jesse's chest, stroked his nipples gently with the pads of his thumbs and rocked slowly down to meet him.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” Jesse breathed, stroking him with the same firm, slow pace of his thrusts, rubbing the hollow of his hip with his metal thumb. “I love watchin’ you above me. Let your hair down, sweetheart. I want the smell of it in my nose when you come.”

Hanzo reached back with one hand and undid the ribbon holding his hair in place, shook it loose around his shoulders. The ribbon went onto the pillows next to Jesse's head, the hand that held it finding its way down his chest. "You do not have to be gentle if you do not wish to be."

Jesse’s slow, careful rhythm faltered as he stilled, and looked up at Hanzo for a long, unreadable moment before one side of his mouth curled upwards in a slow, slightly unsettling grin. “Truth be told, I don’t wanna be,” he said, and lifted a hand off Hanzo’s body to pluck the ribbon off the pillow beside him. “Put your hands behind your back for me, will you, sweetheart?”

Hanzo regarded him silently for a moment, the look on his face and the tension in his body, and then did as he asked, wrists crossed for easier access.

He trailed the ribbon over Hanzo’s thighs, letting the ends drag teasingly as his hands met around Hanzo’s wrists. “If this ain’t your thing, sweetheart, don’t do it just cos I asked you to,” he said softly, beginning to loop it around his hands in what felt like a fairly professional, secure fashion.

"If I were not willing, I would say so." He felt a smile growing at the corners of his mouth and let it stay. "Pushy, as you say."

Jesse’s only response was a sharp inhale of breath, and the ribbon pulling taut against his crossed wrists. “Circulation okay?” he breathed, leaning up to brush a kiss across Hanzo’s mouth, barely waited for his answer before heaving himself up and over, and abruptly was pressing Hanzo into the mattress with his full weight, hands plunged hard and tight in his hair and a wicked smile playing his mouth.

"Yes." It came out a gasp, followed a deep, ragged breath and it was all he could do to check the sound that tried to emerge next.

“I’m gonna fuck you now,” Jesse said into his ear, almost casual, like it was just a conversation, and his hands tightened further, pulling Hanzo’s head backwards just enough to bare his throat, which Jesse took swift advantage of by bending to bite and lick at his leisure, canting his hips backward just enough to slide slowly out until only the tip of him remained inside. “I’m not plannin’ on stopping til you’re not swallowing down those sounds anymore, my love. I wanna hear you—” He abruptly drove his hips forward, with a grunt of pleasure, getting his knees under him. “—make some noise.”

Hanzo clenched his jaw, drew a sharp, deep breath, back arching involuntarily at the pleasure that jolted through him, from those words, from the sensations that came with them, and the smallest of sounds made it past his lips, a tiny mewl that was equal parts hunger and surrender.

“You know damned well that ain’t what I want,” Jesse said into the skin of his throat, slid out of him again with that same deliberate slowness and slammed back into him with the same forceful groan. “You gonna make me work for it, darlin’?”

"Yes." Hanzo replied, half-breathless-laugh, half-teeth-bared-defiance, hooking one leg around
Jesse's waist, holding him in place. "Take what you want."

Jesse's responding growl vibrated against his throat, and a hand raked down his chest, hard and metallic, before curving around his hip and a thumb applying careful pressure until he was forced to pull his leg back from its restraining hold. "You sure you wanna be mouthy, Shimada?" he asked, and hooked that knee over his elbow securely. "Or you got some kinda snark about winning with both hands tied behind your back?"

Hanzo grinned lazily up at him. "I have already won – and my hands are behind my back." He drew a deep breath and released it in a wordless sound of pleasure, muscles clenching tight around him. "Or do you wish to stop?"

Jesse grinned, rocked into him as he tightened, made a muffled noise of enjoyment and closed his eyes as a full body shudder overtook him. "Oh," he said easily, and for a second everything stopped cold because there was a hint of an echo in Jesse’s voice, a tinge of scarlet in his eyes when he opened them again. "Oh, my beloved dragon, I am gonna enjoy fuckin’ the arrogance outta you. Say your prayers now, cos you’ll need ‘em."

For an instant, the breath caught in his throat, his heart skipped a beat, and all thought fled his mind – then the lightning crackled beneath his skin and in the depths of his being he felt the dragons stir, felt the twining of their coils in his flesh and his bones and his soul. He tasted their hunger on his tongue, knew they were looking out through his eyes, knew they were feeling with his skin, with his nerves, knew that their desire matched his. You touched him, the thought curled through his mind, meant for them. You want him?

Their answer curled off his tongue, his voice, their voices. "Gods do not offer prayers, nor do dragons."

Jesse’s smile curled like smoke and mist, and the tinge in his eyes deepened to true crimson as his other hand snaked down to hoist Hanzo’s other knee over his free elbow, and thrust into him slow and leisurely. “I’d worship you,” he said in a harsh, echoing whisper, pressing forward until he was able to kiss the side of Hanzo’s neck. “Gods offer prayers when they think the dragons are worthy, our arrogant, beautiful mates. But that’s not the game we’re playing right now.” His smile curved into a broad, sharp-toothed smirk and he slid a rough hand over Hanzo’s belly, seizing his manhood. "You owe me howls of pleasure," he said, resonant and determined, and drove into him with the first stroke of a hard, fast rhythm matched by the grip and stroke of his hand on Hanzo’s cock.

In the back of Hanzo's mind, he heard husky, draconic laughter and, beneath the surface of his skin, he felt them begin to wriethe as his pleasure became theirs, as their lover touched them, filled them, claimed them, their back arching, their neck lolling. Silken-rough hands stroked over glittering sapphire scales in a place beyond flesh, muscular coils wound through smoke and shadow and rippling dark water and the sound that crawled up their throat in the place where flesh was most assuredly real was a thing of pure ecstasy.

Their lover laughed, a rolling, sinuous, rich and shivery thing, shifted them in his arms, freed their hands, claimed them, whispered his love into their ears, worshipped them with his moans and sighs, his hands and body. Nothing but adoration met their gaze in his eyes, and he nestled them against the pillows to move slow and deep and intimately within them, until his cries were just as loud as theirs.

Hanzo came back to himself slowly, loath to leave the comfort of where he lay cradled in warm and loving shadows, entwined in coils whose scales were soft as a caress. For a long moment after sleep finally released him, that awareness still clung to his mind and body, fading only slowly into
the reality of where he was, warm and safe in the arms of his lover, Jesse a solid presence pressed against his back, face pillowed in his hair, breath curling against his neck and shoulder. He ached, pleasantly, from their exertions and, moving slowly, he rolled over, nestled his head beneath Jesse's chin, and decided that what he had come here to say could wait awhile longer.

“If you wanna go get your camera,” Jesse’s voice, gravelly from sleep, rumbled beneath his ear, with a whole host of laughs suppressed in its amused tones, “and take a picture, you’ll be able to stare at it longer. We’ll wait.”

Hanzo's eyes snapped open. "What?"

Jesse pressed a kiss to the curve of his bare shoulder, shaking silently with amusement, staring toward the door of their room. “We got company,” he said, surprisingly calm, though his mouth twitched uncontrollably. He lost it entirely at the bleat of pure, unadulterated, exquisite distress that abruptly sounded from behind Hanzo’s back, and dissolved into helpless, crying laughter, pressing his face into Hanzo’s hair to muffle his guffaws.

Hanzo breathed in peace and glanced over his shoulder, paused for a moment to savor the look on his brother's unmasked face, and said, sweet as sin, "If it is any consolation, we came to invite you to the wedding."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Plot- and relationships-heavy.

Zenyatta talks a lot.

Hanzo gets to take a real bath.

Genji gets tormented. A lot.

Not being a creature addicted to extravagant luxuries like his fiancé, Jesse was done showering long before Hanzo reappeared from wherever he’d taken his towel, his toiletries bag and his perfectly sublime mood in his quest for a proper bath. Jesse was more than a little grateful for that, since his own mood abruptly shifted to something not quite as amused as it had been when, as he was toweling off, he caught sight of the mark on his hip, stark outlines of a skull with coins for eyes and a lantern in its jaws.

It had changed again, modified no doubt by the enthusiastic participation he’d recently had in a metaphysical five-way. Hanzo’s dragons, it seemed, had added to it. Now, an ouroboros wrapped around the skull, almost embracing it, the head of the dragon with its tail in its jaws resting just above the jagged coin-eyes.

He stared at it for a long moment, jaw clenching involuntarily, then gently touched the dragon’s head with fingers he pretended weren’t trembling a little, because he didn’t know if they were trembling in fear or awe of its appearance. He still wasn’t sure if he’d pulled Charon forward, or if Charon had come on his own. Maybe the dragons had called him, maybe Hanzo had inadvertently done something to attract his attention, like he’d done when he’d called the dragons back in Banff.

He wasn’t even sure he was a hundred percent at ease, now that passion had cooled somewhat and he had a moment to reflect, with the dragons staking a claim on him. If that’s what that meant. It had been an impulsive decision, more instinct than actual thought, to blend into the surge of interest and desire that rose in the back of his mind, to answer a distant call of dragons with shadows and dark water, and it had certainly been enjoyable as all hell, but in hindsight, he had to wonder what the actual hell did any of it mean for him and for Hanzo?

Angie, once upon a time, had lamented the lack of a user’s guide to Avatars, and Jesse desperately wished she’d gotten around to writing one, even though he was fairly certain any such manual would not include advice and tips for when one’s hosted God Program developed a metaphysical affair with one’s fiancé’s spirit dragons. Just his luck, he thought wryly, finishing up with drying himself off, and reaching for his clothes. Out of all the circumstances he could have ended up in, it had to be the one that was brand-fucking-new and totally unprecedented.

Although… It really wasn’t brand new or unprecedented, not entirely anyway, he reflected as he hauled his shirt over his head. Maybe his luck wasn’t completely bad after all, because he happened to be in the one spot on earth where there might actually be a person or two with enough experience to have a legitimate chance of helping him along.
Right after he got something to eat, that was. He had a feeling he’d cope better with everything when his stomach was full.

Genji was lurking in the shadows of an alcove as he made his way through the corridors, following his nose and the scent of something a bit better than the high-caloric-density field rations Lena kept on hand in the plane and pounced – literally, actually pounced – as he came abreast of it, dragging him bodily past the woolen hanging disguising it. "All right. Spill. Everything. Right now."

“Good day to you too,” Jesse said with a laugh, letting himself be dragged into the alcove though, in truth, unless he wanted to get violent, Genji had far greater passive strength than he did and there wasn’t much he could do about that. “Missed you a lot, how’ve you been, we should keep in touch more often, how about this snow and wind.”

Genji, his mask nowhere in evidence and his eyes slightly wild, appeared to realize what sort of figure he was cutting at the moment, paused, took a deep breath, and replied. "Yes, we really should keep in better contact. Hanzo was sending regular reports, just so you know, so I really feel that I do not miss you as much as you have missed me. Also: it is December in Nepal and I understand that the rooms are very cold when they are first opened." The look in his eyes silently begged for some explanation for what he had witnessed that involved said ass-freezing cold. "How are you? What happened in Canada? Are you two fucking with me right now? Please tell me that you're fucking with me, Jesse.”

Just for a moment, Jesse had a surge of something deep in his chest that spread warm and fierce and utterly, sadistically gleeful at the look on Genji’s face. If this was anything like the satisfaction Hanzo had abruptly had thrust on him, Jesse didn’t begrudge him a second of wallowing around in it, because this was delicious. "I got next to no complaints. Sleepin’ a damned sight better’n I used to, so thank you for havin’ the foresight to find someone to watch my back, I really needed it more than I wanted to admit. Canada was a sheer delight – we ended up disposing of sixty bodies and I got a new bullet for my collection and a whole bunch of bruises your brother appreciated a lot less than I did. He’s terribly fussy when other people get hurt on his account.”

"Jesse.” Genji's voice rose a half-octave in pitch. "Yes. Yes, he is. He has always been that way.” A pause. "Sixty? I need this whole story. Immediately.”

“Genji,” Jesse replied with a fierce grin that showed all of his teeth. “Ain’t much to tell, really. Sixty idiots showed up after giving us a week to prepare for their arrival, we prepared really well, we shot a lot of people. Then Hanzo’s dragons ate a bunch more.” He hesitated then, wondering how much into detail he should go, saw Genji notice the hesitation and sighed internally, because he’d get it out of him. “Suppose it’s worth mentioning I got a new tattoo on my hip in the process. Completely unrelated: Hanzo is aware of Project Avatar now. And that you’re part of it.”

"I am struggling to understand how those things are unrelated.” Genji’s gaze traveled the length of his body contemplatively. "Your... companion is awake? Right now?”

"He certainly was about an hour or so ago,” Jesse said with the world’s most pleasant, innocent smile. “That was right around the time Hanzo and I were… enjoying each other’s company.”

"Jesse, for the love of all the gods and dragons that ever were, and the love that I bear for you as my best friend, please tell me that you’re fucking with me right now.” The anguish would have been clearly audible even with the mask.

“Genji,” Jesse replied in mock admonishment, and had to fight hard to keep from cackling at the
cognitive dissonance playing itself out on Genji’s incredibly expressive face. “Why would you want me to tell you I’m fucking with you? Is it so hard to believe that we are really, truly, deeply in love with each other and what you’re witnessing is the best thing that’s ever happened to either of us and not, say, a supremely fitting revenge for all those people you banged in the en suite bathroom between yours and Hanzo’s rooms as kids, namely Midori-the-Squealer, I believe Hanzo referred to her as?”

"Midori wasn’t the squealer, that was Kaede." Genji replied, aggrieved. "Also that was three people at most and is it a terrible thing that I really cannot imagine my brother having sex? Like, I try and then my brain shuts down in self-defense." He stopped, peace-stress breathed, and continued. "If it is revenge, I suppose I deserve it because those three people were more sex than Hanzo ever had in our bathroom. I think. I hope."

“I wouldn’t be certain of that if I were you,” Jesse replied with the kind of serene smile Hanzo normally wore when he was feeling particularly devious. “You wouldn’t believe the lengths I have to go to in order to get him to make any sort of noise at all. I think he delights in makin’ me work for it. He coulda had a steady parade of partners through the bathroom and you’d never know the difference.”

"You are enjoying this entirely too much." He shuddered, whole body. "It's like imagining my parents only worse somehow."

Jesse laughed, decided to take pity on him. “Okay, Genji. I’m totally fuckin’ with you.” A long pause, just enough for the words to parse and relief to begin setting in. He tried not to sound too smugly triumphant when he added, “It was never about havin' well-deserved revenge on your sexual indiscretions. We really are gettin’ married. I’m already plannin’ on hyphenating. What d’you think of Shimada-McCree?”

"...I see that Hanzo actually talked to you," Genji observed faintly. "Excuse me, I think I need to be alone for a moment."

“Wait.” Jesse sighed and let the good humor fall away. “There actually is somethin’ fairly important I need to ask. About Charon. And Hanzo’s dragons. You might actually be the only person I can ask, and no, I swear on my guns I’m not fuckin’ with you now.”

Genji blinked at him, and sobered at the look on his face. "Ask it."

In reply, Jesse shifted his marked hip forward, lifted his shirt a little, thumbed down the waistband of his jeans a little. “The dragon showed up today, just a bit ago,” he said, and didn’t suppress the note of trepidation. “How much should I be worryin’, given that I ain’t even exactly sure how Charon and Zentatsu an’ Mizuchi even got involved in what we were doing?”

"Oh. Oh." The tip of one metallic finger traced along the curve of the dragon's head. "This... happens sometimes, even without, well, other mitigating circumstances. When our parents married, their dragons... appeared on one another, a sign that their union was favored by their bondmates, as well. Zentatsu and Mizuchi clearly approve of you – they may consider you my brother's mate, whether you've exchanged any vows yet or not." A little smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "And they... might approve of Charon, as well. Have they communicated in any way?"

"I believe the words I'd worship you were uttered,” Jesse said dryly, “in response to them speakin’ directly through Hanzo. Which is right after I said a few other things to your brother I don’t think the fragility of your mind can parse without breaking right now. And there was a time back in Canada. Hanzo called ‘em to help dispose of a pile of corpses and…” He shook his head. “I don’t
know what exactly, but they felt more… alive, solid, when they absolutely terrified Hanzo by circlin’ around me. Like I was partly wherever they were, or Charon was an’ I was sharing his senses. They spoke to me, or him, or us, then. Said they approved, that I was suitable.” He shoved a hand through his hair in sudden frustration, sighed, let his shoulders slump. “I don’t know, Genji. I’m floundering through it all and I’m doing my best to hold it together so Hanzo doesn’t start puttin’ more grey in his hair with worry, but I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Y’all had Gabe and Jack and Angie and Winston when you went through this. But that ain’t an option for me right now.”

"Oh my friend." Genji sighed and wrapped his arms around him. "I am sorry – this is difficult, even at the best of times. I can tell you, for your peace of mind, that Artemis and Tombo speak to one another. Sometimes I think they can communicate more clearly with each other than they do with me." A wry smile crawled across his face. "We will figure this out, I promise you. And if we do not have to worry my brother, we will not. You both deserve peace of mind, even if the idea of you two writhing around orgiastically on the beds in the guest quarters makes me want to run screaming down the side of the mountain."

Jesse leaned gratefully into Genji’s solidity and warmth, something he’d never tell the little shit he’d desperately missed at his side. "If it helps," he said as he returned the embrace, because he quite honestly could not resist that opening, “only one of us was writhing orgiastically, and it wasn’t me.”

Genji shuddered. "You asshole. Let us find you something to eat."

Jesse snickered and opened his mouth, then shut it again at Genji’s murderous and desperate warning look. “I’ll be good,” he said with a smirk. “Lead the way, little brother. I’m starving.”

* 

The monastery had a bathhouse. It was that discovery, atop the purely spiritual/sensual bliss of the morning’s activities and the resonant mental trauma that had suffused his brother’s face in that brief instant he spent framed in the guest room door, that sent Hanzo’s mood from wonderful to the best mood since the invention of brain chemistry. And he was not even slightly inclined to hide it, greeting everyone who spoke to him – Lena, monks, monastery staff – with the same good cheer, particularly the ones who pointed him in the direction of hot water and towels.

He scrubbed thoroughly, using the chance to stretch, rinsed, and slid slowly into the bath, hissing softly as the hot, gently saline water found every half-healed scrape and soaked into his muscles as he sank down to sit, the water reaching slightly over the curve of his shoulders. For a moment he luxuriated in it, the first proper bath he had had since leaving Hong Kong, resting his head against the lip of the pool and allowing his thoughts to thin and stretch and wander, more at peace than he had been since their involuntary flight. In the back of his mind, in the deep silent places of his being, he felt his companions doing likewise, in a state not precisely dissimilar to post-coital lassitude and it startled a laugh past his lips, soft and husky.

Pleased with yourselves? he asked and did not entirely expect the wave of perfect joy that rolled through him in response, so strong it brought tears to his eyes.

Our mate has been a long time in coming, Zentatsu murmured.

Our mate is all we could have wished for and more, Mizuchi purred.

Jesse? Hanzo licked his lips, forced the chill back down his spine, clung to serenity with all his
might. Charon?

Yes, they said, with one voice, and subsided into smugly draconic silence.

Which, he supposed, answered that question, at least as far as they were concerned. He should, he thought, be far more worried about that than he was, than he could bring himself to be at this moment. He promised himself, at some point in the near future, that he would have a solid fit of overthinking every aspect in which he would question his own sanity and fitness in mind and spirit to be emotionally involved with another human being and his lover, his beloved, his mate in particular but, for the moment, he chose to simply hold the knowledge close that his closest companions, the beings with whom he was as one soul, adored him as well. From that point, many other things both could and would be built. He might even permit himself to believe he deserved them, one day.

He soaked for some length of time, which he made no attempt to measure, rising only when his mind nearly wandered into the precincts of genuine sleep, which he did not want to risk. He needed to eat, and he needed to speak to Jesse and to Genji, and then he could rest, curled in sheets and blankets that smelled of his mate, until they returned to their home to plan the rest of their lives together – or, at the very least, the immediate future.

He saw it as he scrubbed himself dry with soft, warm towels, high on his right shoulder, beneath the old scars of the clan brand, the two dragons chasing one another, etched in fine dark lines of something that caught the light in a metallic gleam. A lantern. He laid his hand over it and felt, for an instant, a pulse of warmth against his palm.

*  

Though the Omnic monks who lived here clearly had no need to eat, they nevertheless settled around the low table on which the simple fare was served, participating in the social aspect of mealtimes, if not the biological. Jesse found himself in short order seated next to an Omnic who looked to have begun life as a Sentry class, but had been modified somewhere along the way to have a more humanoid appearance. Maybe, Jesse thought after a brief but vivid flashback to the news reports from the previous year, the modifications had been made to try and make… him? Her? Them?... appear less like the murderbots hacked by a rogue God Program and more like a non-threatening individual seeking peace and harmony with the universe.

Sister Avidyatta was hands-down the best dinner conversationalist Jesse’d ever had the pleasure of sitting beside. She introduced herself, very self-deprecatingly, as “one of the recovering, now formerly-and-not-currently-crazy Sentries” and while he was still reeling from that, roped him into conversation so adroitly, he was halfway to inviting her to the wedding before he could gather his wits about him.

No matter how engaging she was, however, she could not and did not distract him from noticing Hanzo’s slightly late arrival, nor did he miss the adoring eyes Genji, further down the table, turned to the Omnic floating beside him. Jesse grinned faintly at the sight of that, even though it meant he owed Lena ten bucks.

Hanzo was the most serene and relaxed Jesse’d seen him in quite a while, perfectly at peace as he passed dishes and consumed his soup, like karma had finally dealt him a good hand, and he intended to thoroughly enjoy it. It almost physically hurt to see him so happy, and if Jesse hadn’t already known, breath to blood to bone, that he’d do anything to see him stay happy, he’d have decided it then and there.

He dropped a hand lightly on the back of Hanzo’s neck, rubbing a small circle into the side of his
throat with a thumb, smiled fondly when Hanzo turned an absolutely beaming smile up to him. “If it’s alright with you, sweetheart, I think I’m gonna find somewhere quiet and try that meditation thing you keep after me to learn. Seems like if I’m ever gonna develop a taste for it, I may as well try while I’m in the most introspective place on the face of the planet.”

"An entirely commendable course of action." Hanzo leaned into him, set a kiss precisely on the corner of his mouth. "Are you going with one of the monks? Do not forget to take water with you. Dehydration is a risk at this altitude. And you have experienced altitude sickness before this."

There were any number of responses he could make to that, ranging from annoyed to irked to humoring Hanzo. But instead, the fond smile just grew broader, and he leaned in to kiss his fiancé like he’d just been offered some grand romantic gesture. “You’re cute when you’re fretting,” he murmured, still smiling. “But yes, darlin’. I’ll ask Zenyatta t’come with me, and I’ll make sure I have water.” He tilted his head up, enough to press a kiss to his forehead. “You gonna go traumatize your poor baby brother some more while I’m out?”

Hanzo glanced down the table with an expression of such ineffable benevolence that Jesse felt, for the briefest of instants, almost sorry for the meddling little shit. Almost.

"I will try to avoid causing him permanent harm, have no fear." His expression genuinely softened a fraction. "I do wish to speak with him."

Jesse smiled, let his palm drift down the sleeve covering Hanzo’s dragon tattoo, and thought about whether or not he should make any mention of the addition to his skin. From what Genji said, it could only be construed as a good thing, and Hanzo did worry more than he should about the longevity prospects of their relationship. In the end, maybe he always would have that faint sense of unease within him, the last dregs of certainty he didn’t deserve his blessings and it was only a matter of time before Jesse, or Charon, or his dragons decided it was over. But maybe this meant he wouldn’t, and no matter how lingering the last pangs of his own uncertainty, there wasn’t much Jesse wouldn’t do to ease those worry lines on Hanzo’s brow.

“Before you do, before I forget, or before I get lost somewhere in the Himalayas, I want to show you somethin’.” He drew Hanzo aside, gently, to a corner of the room, and hooked his thumb in the waistband of his jeans. “I know you worry one day or another, I’ll come to my senses and take my love elsewhere, but this happened some time while we were sleeping, and I’ve decided I’m happy it did.” He drew aside denim and plaid, enough to tease the top of the skull, where the dragon rested peacefully. “As for the other three apparently involved here, well… I think that’s pretty firm, darlin’.”

The tips of Hanzo’s fingers slid across the new mark, testing the texture, and then his hand settled possessively on the curve of Jesse’s hip. "It is." He looked up, and the smile on his face was fierce and sharp. "You are not the only one so marked." He slid the sleeve of his shirt high enough to expose the fine lines engraved into the skin of his right upper arm.

Jesse’s mouth went a little dry, like dust or ashes coated his throat, as he lifted a hand to trace the lantern with a fingertip. “This sit okay with you?” he asked softly, pretended like he wasn’t half-afraid to know the answer.

"As I told you before," Hanzo replied, just as soft, and caught his hand tight. "If I did not want this, I would say so."

“Well, alright then.” He cupped Hanzo’s cheek. “No more worryin’. All parties have spoken, and all parties are in agreement.” He nudged his nose gently into Hanzo’s, settled his mouth featherlight for a brief kiss. “I love you, darlin’. Now go on and play nice with your fragile sibling. Blackwatch ain’t so overstaffed we can stand for you to break a fair-to-middling agent before we
"I promise I will not make his head explode." A pause. "More than we already have."

He did, in fact, go then, gliding the length of the table to kneel next to his brother, bending close to speak quietly to him. From the set of Genji's back and shoulders, whatever he said was disarming: they shook, just a little, and a moment later a quiet laugh rose above the level of background conversation and they stood together, Genji offering his brother a hand up, which was accepted.

It warmed Jesse’s heart no small amount to see it, knowing as he did how much each of them had longed for it. He indulged himself in watching the brothers Shimada wander with their heads bent together out of the communal area, sighed contentedly, and turned around.

And came face to face with Lena, peering up at him with that irritatingly knowing look she was so good at portraying. “You weren’t planning on goin’ out into the wind and snow to try and commune with your houseguest, were you, luv?”

“Not if it’s gonna cause me no end of misery,” he returned pleasantly, “like that of a nagging little sister who doesn’t know when to not poke her nose into other people’s timelines.”

She scoffed and grinned cheekily. “Could be I just know you that well, Jesse. For a world-class elite operative, you’re not always as sneaky as you ought to be, especially around people who know how to read you.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “So you’re tellin’ me you didn’t cheat and have Hermes take a quick look ahead at the most likelihoods?”

“Oh no,” she says airily. “I totally cheated. Of course I cheated. Who do you think I am to be able to deduce that without cheating, Mama? I’m just saying it’s not the only way I could have known.”

“Your logic is flawless.” He eyed her for a moment, they grinned at each other. Then he tilted his head and asked, “So what, brat? Gonna try an’ stop me?”

She shook her head before he’d even finished speaking. “No, luv,” she replied. “I’m goin’ with you.” A pause. “I’ve been partnered with Hermes a long time. It isn’t like there’s a user’s guide or a training program for us. Thought I’d see what I could do to help you along.” Her grin returned then, impish and dangerous and full-force. “Unless, of course, you’d rather freeze your bits off while trying to find your inner balance, that is.”

He chuckled, which grew into a full-throated laugh. “Naw, brat,” he said, looped an arm around her shoulders. “Did that in Banff. Like to try avoiding that this time, see how that goes.”

Lena looked thoughtful, then smiled up at him wryly. “Chances are it wouldn’t work for you anyway,” she said. “Cold, thin air, howling wind and blinding snow don’t really feel like Charon’s cup of tea. Hermes, maybe, but he’s a different God Program altogether. It’d be better in a place that’s… resonant, for lack of a better word.”

His return smile was just as wry. “You couldn’t tell me that before we came to the rooftop of the world where there’s nary a deep, dark, mist-shrouded river in sight?”

“I honestly didn’t think to,” Lena replied with a perfectly childish stuck-out tongue. “It has been a busy few days, and even I’m having trouble keeping up with all the twists and turns that keep popping up. But I’m sure we can find something suitable here. A hot springs beneath the monastery proper, or maybe a room with a pool or those big communal baths we can steam up and light with candles.” She slid her elbow around Jesse’s arm, and proceeded to hold it captive against
her side, tight in both hands. “We should go ask Zenyatta if he could show us somewhere suitable.”

Jesse grinned down at her, but let himself be led toward the other end of the hall, where the Omnis and the humans who lived here full time were stacking away the dining furniture, turning the hall over for, he supposed, that evening meditation Brother Dszatta had mentioned when he showed them to their room. “I think you got ulterior motives here, brat, that have very little to do with me an’ quite a bit to do with getting dirt on Genji’s love life. Now, that said, is there any chance I’m gettin’ rid of you any time soon?”

“No in the slightest,” Lena said happily, and leaned her head against his arm as they walked. “You’re stuck with me forever. Blame Jack and Gabe for that. I do.”

* * *

The sky overhead was clear and cloudless and a shade of blue not unlike dragon scales as they climbed the wall of the mountain together to reach the place that Genji favored for privacy and meditation, thirty meters above the highest of the monastery buildings. In deference to reality, they had paused long enough in the private quarters for Hanzo to retrieve his jacket and his gloves, and in the kitchen to beg a few bottles of water, for which he was enormously grateful once they reached their perch, a shelf of rock no more than two meters long and less than half that deep. From that vantage, Hanzo could see why his brother sought it out: the main bulk of the monastery spread out below them, a cluster of cobbled paths and peaked rooves, clinging to the plateau like a toy village in a model, the snowcapped mountains knife-edged and shining against the impossibly blue arch of the sky falling away as far as the eye could see. The beauty of it was more breathtaking than the cold.

Hanzo braced his back firmly against the icy stone, closed his eyes, and spent a moment simply breathing. Shambali lay more than five thousand meters above sea level and he could feel it in the effort it took to catch his breath following the exertion of the climb, his heart beating more quickly, the blood pulsing in his temples, the sunlight bright but not warm on his face. Genji settled next to him, close enough that their legs touched, and he felt his brother's fingertips settle against the pulse-point in his wrist for a moment.

“I am not as young as I once was,” Hanzo said, dryly. “But I am not that old, my brother.”

“You have maintained yourself admirably,” Genji replied, equally dry. “But I'm fairly sure that high altitude edema doesn't really care and, unlike me, you haven't spent weeks here acclimatizing yourself. Allow me my concern for your well-being.”

A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I will permit it, since you asked so nicely." He opened his eyes and found his brother's scarred face, unmasked, inches from his own, his eyes glittering green, flecked in gold and silver. Their eyes met, and held, and after a moment their foreheads touched. "It is... good to see you again.”

Genji heroically forbore any remarks about their last meeting and handed him a bottle of water. "I admit, I did not expect it to be so soon.”

Hanzo uncapped the bottle and sipped slowly, letting the water cool his exercise-and-altitude parched throat. "It seemed unnecessarily hostile and also tactless to tell you that I am marrying your dearest friend over the phone.” The involuntary noise that came out of his brother was still the very sweetest music and he couldn't help but smile at it. "Also, I wanted to ask you to come back home with us and participate. Jesse agrees. If you wish.”
"I hope," Genji said carefully, "that you have no intention of breaking into the castle in order to have your wedding in the wisteria garden like mother and father did."

"No," Hanzo replied. "For one thing, I would prefer that my marriage not begin with unnecessary bloodshed. For another, the rooftop garden at my home in Hong Kong has a properly enormous wisteria tree in it. I was thinking there."

"Hong Kong is, I think, within the bounds of possibility." Genji caught his hand and squeezed it tightly. "You two are not actually fucking with me, are you? You are in love with him. And he loves you. And he asked you --"

"I asked him. It seemed the only reasonable course of action." He returned the squeeze at Genji's secondary sounds of amazement. "We were, after all, possibly about to die."

"And yet here you are." He even managed to say it without sounding completely strangled. "Hanzo --"

"You do not have to come if you do not want to," Hanzo said, steadily, swallowing what was trying to become a knot of dismay in his throat. "I understand that you have found peace here and that --"

"Hanzo." Genji's arms closed around him, tightly, and he found his chin resting on his brother's armored shoulder, returning the embrace, before he could think of a reason not to do it. "Of course I will come with you. You idiot." His voice softened. "I... did not imagine that this is what would come of it when I brought you together. I thought that Jesse would be good for you -- that he could show you what you could become if you would forgive yourself the past. But I am not unhappy that you have both found more than that in each other."

"Thank you," Hanzo finally murmured, against Genji's shoulder, once he was certain he could speak again. "I have not forgiven myself. I do not know that I will. But I... regret your absence in my life, and I would be the brother to you that I should have been years ago, but was not. I am sorry."

He held Genji until his brother's breathing evened and his shoulders stopped shaking and only then drew back, one arm still around him, chin resting atop his head. "The green hair suits you, Sparrow. I always thought so."

The last of the tension bled from Genji's spine. "Thank you." A pause. "You need a haircut. You are too young for that much white."

Hanzo's laughter echoed down the side of the mountain.

*  

"The outbuilding beside the hostel," Zenyatta said as he floated slightly in front and beside Jesse, in such rich, serene melodies of voice he could swear he was getting a contact Zen just from proximity, "is a recent addition to our home. While most of us have no need or desire to bathe in hot water, it was such a popular request from those visiting us we decided to acquiesce to the demand. It should be sufficient for your needs."

"Much obliged," Jesse said, shaking his head slightly to rid it of the drifty dreaminess threatening to settle over his thoughts. "You must get a lot of visitors to go through the trouble of digging out a spring on the off-chance someone's gonna stay long enough to use it."

"You would be surprised," Zenyatta replied mildly, pausing in midair to reach forward through the swirl of his floating orbs and open the door to the squat, mostly windowless building sitting not
quite flush with the hostel, and Jesse had to bite his lip to stifle the moan of pure delight at the damp warmth that washed out against his face. “It is, as such things are designed, simplistic and minimal, but perhaps that will aid your meditative attempts rather than hinder them.”

Jesse wasn’t sure if there was a question at the tail end of that statement or not, because Zenyatta’s vocal modulator added such nuance to his words, it was hard to tell what was a natural pitch of his cadence and what was the instinctive up-tone indicating a query. He decided to treat it like one anyway, just in case. “I have no idea,” he replied honestly, with a broad, helpless shrug. ‘I’ve never been the type of person content to just sit and think of nothin’, Tekhartha. Course, I had to go and get myself tangled up with a sadistic sort who is determined to have me living long and healthfully alongside him, so I’m doing all kinds of things I never thought I’d do.”

“Such as meditation?” Definite amusement.

Jesse grinned easily over his shoulder. “That, and quittin’ smoking, eatin’ less red meat, attempting to take fewer risks with any sundry parts of myself he might have a use for, including my head. Give it a couple of years, and he’ll be tucking me into bed promptly at ten for a good night’s sleep. His plans for the future include us growing old and boring together, and he’s hell on wheels when he’s determined to have his way.”

Zenyatta made a harmonious noise that might have been his version of a chuckle. “You sound very much in love. May I offer my congratulations?”

“You absolutely may. Thank you kindly.” Figuring he should stop wasting his time and Zenyatta’s, to say nothing of Lena’s from wherever she’d disappeared in search of the candles and incense she insisted would help him concentrate, Jesse squared his shoulders and stepped through the door, into a humid warmth that had him inhaling far more deeply than he had in hours, in sheer enjoyment of normal air.

When he had the wherewithal to do more than inhale in delight, he assessed the facilities as well as he could, which was, if he had to be honest, random guesswork at best. The pool itself was longer than it was wide, carved out of the natural stone of the plateau from the look, sealed watertight and lined in decorative tile to make the edges more secure. It rippled gently as he watched, surface steaming, circulated by some mechanism he could neither see nor hear. Wooden benches lined the far wall, along with hooks and cubbies for clothes and towels and toiletries, with buckets for scooping out water and scrubbing over the drainage grates.

He caught himself rubbing his fingertips just under the waist of his jeans, along the very topmost edge of Charon’s mark in … he wasn’t sure what to label the state of mind. Dismay, frustration, irritation, impatience, helplessness, completely lost… they all might have been right, in parts and pieces, but somehow didn’t quite sum up the entirety of the tightly-packed ball of something lodged in the pit of his stomach. He shoved the offending hand firmly in the pocket of his jacket and clenched his jaw, good mood ruined without quite knowing why.

“Jesse,” Zenyatta said, softly and so closely behind him, it was all he had not to react like he’d been attacked. “My apologies if I’m overstepping your boundaries into personal matters, but your mood seems to have shifted rather abruptly. Are you alright?”

He didn’t answer for a few minutes, because he didn’t really know how to even begin untangling things enough to find a good place to start. But he finally blew out a long, heavy sigh, smiled wryly at Zenyatta, and said, “No, I ain’t. Just don’t know what to do about it.”

Zenyatta floated a few inches closer to him, until he was well within arm’s reach, but made no
move to invade his personal space further. “You do not seem to be disquieted in the bounds of your relationship with Hanzo,” he said politely, and with such compassion, Jesse was abruptly reminded of the savage glee with which he’d punched in the teeth of those ignorant fucksticks at the Hong Kong Skyport the night of his arrival.

“No,” he agreed. “Hanzo ain’t the problem. Hell, meeting him is the most profound thing I’ve ever had happen in my life. Even the pain in the ass parts of our relationship aren’t anything I’d give up without a fight to the death.”

“Then what troubles you?” It seemed the most natural thing in the world for Zenyatta to settle his hand on Jesse’s shoulder, and he sighed and slumped under the gentle, empathetic squeeze, rubbed his face tiredly. “If I am prying where I am not wanted, Jesse…”

“Old ghosts, Zenyatta,” he said, couldn’t force even the wryest, most humourless of smiles, so he didn’t even try. “Old ghosts and a whole host of changes being made, and I’m just having a moment where it ain’t so easy to hold all the panic and fear and dread and worry churnin’ my gut to pieces at bay.”

“There are those among us,” Zenyatta said calmly, soothingly, “who would advise you to not even try. We feel emotions for a reason, they argue. These feelings, these sensations, have purpose and function. To hold them back, in their opinion, is to deny something vital, fundamental, for our understanding of ourselves, something important to our personal growth.” He paused a moment, his head tilting slightly to the left. “I don’t fully disagree with this school of thought, but I believe this philosophy is overlooking something even more vital in self-enlightenment and spiritual growth: why an individual seeks to suppress and ignore and not feel these things.” His head tipped a little further. “Why do you wish to hold them at bay, Jesse?”

He laughed, soft, a tiny bit amused. “Oh, I got a laundry list of perfectly reasonable and maybe even valid reasons why I don’t feel I should be able to have a perfectly reasonable reaction to a series of upheavals and world-shifts in what has been a long span of years in which traumatic upheavals and unbelievable world-shifting shit has gone on. I could give you chapter and verse on why it’s better for me to act like nothin’s wrong. It ranges all the way from what good is panicking gonna do me right up through Hanzo needs me to be clear and calm so he can be the one to feel things and I am self-aware enough to know that every single excuse and explanation is a bunch of horseshit I tell myself so I don’t have to think about how fucked up almost everything is. Deep down, it’s because I don’t wanna bother people with my weaknesses, because the weak get abandoned and thrown away, and I still can’t shake that fucking belief, even though I know how utterly, completely wrong it is. Deep down, I don’t think I believe I’m actually worth half the trouble people have gone through or any of the rules they’ve broken or the morals they’ve compromised to keep me breathing. I know I should believe it, but I’m not sure I do.”

Zenyatta's spheres, orbiting him like his own tiny collection of planets, chimed gently, the only sound following that beyond the rippling of the water. For a long moment, the monk was silent, and then a low sound escaped him, something close to a sigh, and he stretched out both hands, laying them open on his knees. "You are not alone in that, Jesse."

“I don’t wanna talk to Hanzo about it,” Jesse said in a much quieter tone, “because I know I should. I know I do want to tell him how shit scared having a God Program in my head, or arm, or wherever it calls home makes me feel, but I’m really good at convincing myself he doesn’t need to worry more about it. The more I convince him it’s all going to be fine and dandy, the less sure I am it will be.”

"Fear is a natural thing in this context – you have undergone, and you will be undergoing, great
changes both internal and external." The monk's voice was soft, the orbit of his spheres expanding to encompass them both. "I cannot say that I believe withholding your thoughts and fears from the one you love is the best course of action. That choice is yours to make. I believe, however, that I may assist you in coming to some terms with your companion."

"Hanzo’s really good at winnowing shit outta me," he said, ruefully. "I’ll talk to him about it. I know it ain’t healthy, and I promised him honesty, so I know I gotta live up to that end of it." He sighed then, scrubbing both hands through his hair in frustration. "I’m just floundering for how to get a handle on any of it. This used to be Gabe’s damned job, and now it’s mine, and some part of me just wants to pass the whole thing off to someone who knows how to be a better adult. Whatever small part of it you can help me with, Zenyatta, I’d be very much obliged to you.” A beat. “If you can convince Lena to sit still and not offer advice every six seconds. I love that girl to pieces, but I’m kinda dreading trying to get in touch with my inner AI with her chattering at me.”

"Brother Dszatta is currently entertaining her,” Zenyatta said, quite serenely, as his orbs chimed softly again. “I believe he has planned a quite spirited discussion group for several of the monks and their acolytes on the metaphysics of space and time. Given Miss Oxtón’s … particular set of skills and unique experiences, Brother Dszatta thought she would be a most thought-provoking participant in the debates.”

For a long moment, Jesse could do nothing but stare. “How fortuitous for Brother Dszatta,” he said, surprised he didn’t sound strangled, that he sounded almost normal, casual, “that coincidence played so well in his favour.”

“Yes,” Zenyatta replied, and he didn’t have any sort of flex to his faceplate and thus no facial expression, but damned if Jesse didn’t see the smirk anyway, “it was quite serendipitous. For all parties.” He lifted one hand, laid it gently on Jesse’s shoulder again. “I cannot promise your visit here will solve your concerns and issues, Jesse, but I do promise you I will do what I can to help ease your burdens.” A pause. Then, gentler, “Are you ready to begin?”

No, he wanted to say, through a mouth suddenly dry as a desert, but what came out instead was, “May as well. Ain’t gettin’ any younger just talkin’ about it.”

* 

It was not at all impossible that Gyorg might have a stroke. Venera, sitting next to him at the end of the conference table had the brief, savage wish that he would that she could conduct business without his choleric outbursts. Such as the one he was having now, at length, in Georgian, to the holopanel hovering directly across from her in which Lady Shimada sat, perfectly calm and composed, having received the unwelcome news that her son was still alive.

"Gyorg," Venera growled as he finally sputtered to a halt. "Sit down before you fall down."

"Yes, Vachnadze-sama," Lady Shimada added, her voice soft and soothing. "It does none of us any good for you to make yourself unnecessarily ill."

"Unnecessarily?!" Gyorg shouted and his face, which had mellowed to brick red, immediately went purple again, a vein visibly throbbing in his temple. "Madame, I am not certain you comprehend the gravity of what these threats, if carried out, could do to our --" 

Venera pinched the bridge of her nose and snapped, in Georgian, "Yes, because insulting the intelligence of our ally to her face is a such a wise course of action. Please, Gyorg."

"I know precisely what they could do." Lady Shimada's voice, no longer soft, cut through their
argument like the edge of an ice cold knife. "I do not care. Sit down, Gyorg Vachnadze. You are
beginning to irritate me."

Gyorg's mouth fell open and worked soundlessly for a moment but he did, in fact, sit down.

"Threats with no teeth are pointless – it is very possible that our objective would enjoy completely
destroying your lives, your livelihoods, the inheritance you hope to leave to your successors, and
your good name, just before his partner kills as many of you as he feels like killing." Her face, as
she said it, was a sweetly perfect mask. "Particularly considering the ham-fisted incompetence with
which the mercenaries you hired failed to accomplish even part of our mutual goal."

"Prodigy Security came highly recommended to us for their capabilities and their
discretion." Venera, just barely, managed not to hiss.

"I am certain they did." Her tone suggested that she knew nothing of the sort and frankly doubted
it. "Nonetheless, they did not succeed at their task."

"You advised us --" Gyorg began, having regained his breath, if not healthy color.

"I advised you that speed and the precision application of overwhelming force would be the ideal
method of defeating his defenses." Coldly. "Neither of which occurred. And now we have lost
anything resembling an element of surprise. Fortunately, I have other resources I may draw upon to
assist us. What I require from you is the liquidity necessary to deploy them and to stay out of my
way."

"Gyorg," Venera said softly. "How much more must we sacrifice for the sake of pride? Konstantin
made his own mistakes and paid for them with his life."

"Our grandson, Venera." And that, she could tell, was all the argument he would give. "Your
requirements will be met, Lady Shimada. In return, we require insulation against reprisal – we can
no longer be connected, directly or indirectly, to this matter."

"It will be as you wish." The serenely pleasant mask returned and one could almost forget that the
woman was discussing commissioning the murder of her own son. "My assistant will forward the
amounts required and the accounts in which it must be deposited once my arrangements are
made. A good evening to you, Vachnadze-sama, Melikov-sama."

The connection blinked closed.

*

"Idiots," Tokiko Shimada growled, as soon as the screen went dark.

Her assistant, a young woman trained from earliest childhood in the arts of silence, competence,
and discretion, as well as reading the direction of her mistress' thoughts, manifested at her elbow,
bowed deeply, and handed her a tablet and the particular cellular phone she used for contacting
only one individual. Using those tools, Lady Shimada made a number of determinations regarding
overall cost variables, increased them all by a factor of ten, and then dialed the only number saved
on that sleek black phone. It rang twice.

"Greetings, Ogundimu-sama. My apologies for the lateness of the hour..."
Chapter 15

For an exercise that was supposed to promote calmness and inner balance, meditation sure as fuck was the most frustrating activity Jesse had ever attempted to undertake. It looked easy as pie when other people did it, and even knowing that slipping as rapidly into a meditative state as fast as Hanzo and Genji did took time and discipline to learn somehow did not stop the baseless expectation that he’d be able to grasp it with no trouble.

Zenyatta had chosen his name well, because no matter how much Jesse fidgeted and grumbled, shifted around or changed positions, from kneeling to sitting to standing to kneeling again, he didn’t look the slightest bit perturbed. “The arrangement of your limbs is not the important part, Jesse,” he said over the soft ring of his spheres. “Only that you are comfortable enough to focus your attention away from external distractions. I find it helps my concentration if I do not worry about how I am positioned, but focus on a single sound, such as the chimes made by my orbs. Some of our human members remark on the helpfulness of concentrating on their breathing. I,” he said, with a pitch of amused tones, “cannot verify this claim, of course, as I lack the ability to breathe and have not been able to test it for myself.”

“I imagine so,” Jesse said with a smile he couldn’t help. “But it ain’t as easy as it sounds.”

“I understand that better than you might think, my friend. It took me many weeks of study and countless attempts before I could begin to see the path toward inner peace. You look surprised. Many are when they learn that Omnis possess no true special advantage above humans in learning to quiet one’s mind. They believe we may partition our minds, compartmentalize our mental processes. That is, in a way, true, but it is not the proper path. Spiritual growth and self-understanding cannot be achieved by taking shortcuts, after all.”

Jesse blinked, processed that. “Huh. I suppose that makes sense. Guess I hadn’t really put too much thought into it.”

“Not many do,” Zenyatta said, with an audible smile, if not a visual one. “We take no offense at the misconception. It is a logical, if erroneous, conclusion to draw.” His spheres chimed again as he moved into a more upright position. “I think it is time to move onto other things for a time, Jesse. Perhaps some dinner? You must be hungry.”

Truth be told, he was a little bit starving, but they couldn’t have been here that long already. Could they have? “If you think so, Zenyatta,” he said dubiously, wincing at the stiffness in his legs as he unfolded them.

“Enlightenment cannot be rushed, my friend,” Zenyatta reassured him, touching him lightly on the shoulder as Jesse rose with a snarl and a groan. “No matter how much Brother Genji tries to convince you it can. We will return later this evening, or perhaps tomorrow, and begin again.”

Or never, Jesse added silently, but said nothing as he held the door for Zenyatta and left the bathhouse in search of warmth and food.

* 

Brother Dszatta showed her to a lovely room filled with thick, warm blankets and a space heater, but Lena had no intention of using it, though she said nothing but a cheery “Thank you!” when Dzsatta left her to her own devices shortly after nightfall. She stayed only long enough to change out of her travel-worn clothing, liberate one of the blankets to wrap herself in so she wouldn’t
freeze in her sleeping clothes while she padded through the stone corridors, and promptly left again in search of Genji's room.

Fifteen minutes later, now dearly wishing she’d worn thicker socks because her feet were icy cold, a passing Omnic whose name she didn’t know took pity on her and rescued her from the warren of corridors and antechambers by taking her directly to Genji’s door. She paused only long enough to gratefully thank them, on behalf of her and her poor, frozen toes, and popped straight from the floor to slightly above where she judged his bed would be.

Purely by accident, she landed directly on top of him as she dropped out of her short hop, but between the surprised squawk and the flailing as the holobook in his hands went flying to the floor, she wasn’t ever going to tell him she hadn’t planned that to a fucking tee. “Genji.” Without bothering to untangle herself from him, she threw her arms around his neck for the most exuberant hug of which she was capable. “I missed you.”

"Lena." His arms closed around her, as well, though not before he attempted to subtly slide the holobook under a bit of furniture. "I've missed you, too. How are you?"

“Freezing, actually,” she said, not so subtly twisting around to fish the holobook back out again, flipping it open as she did so. She was promptly confronted with a family picture of the Shimadas, floating serenely above its embedded page. Hanzo and Genji looked remarkably young. “Did you know that it’s really bloody cold at night up here?”

"It's really cold up here all the time." His fingers twitched, visibly resisting a number of antisocial urges. "It keeps everyone's processors running more comfortably. May I have that, please?"

“Uh huh,” she said, dragging it up to spread across her lap while she conveniently sprawled in his, and turned the page, immediately grinning at the tiny ninja with green hair sitting on the shoulders of a long-suffering small Hanzo that popped up next. “Absolutely you may. In a second, though. There’s so much blackmail material in here and I want to soak in as much of it as I can.”

"You are the – no, I cannot even say the worst now because I have seen the worst with my own eyes and I will never be able to unsee it. You are the second worst, forever." He leaned back, propped himself, and looked over her shoulder and sighed. "Father let me get away with everything. Even then."

“I would ask you what the worst is, but I’m terrified to know the answer.” She kept flipping the pages, alternatingly awwing and cooing at the frankly adorable little Shimadas she found in the photos, and shrieked in laughter when she lingered too gushingly long over a particularly hilarious and adorable image of Tiny Toddler Genji and promptly lost the book as he seized his opportunity and yanked it away from her. “Does Hanzo know you have these? I’m sure he’d love to see them.” She could feel her own grin growing broader and more evil. “Ooh. I bet Jesse would love to see them too.”

Genji wavered, holding the book out of easy reach. "You're right... I'm sure he would. And I'm equally certain that Hanzo doesn't know, since Hanzo didn't take anything from the castle that he couldn't fit in his pockets when he left." A wry smile. "Of course, that included a substantial chunk of the family fortune, banking being what it is, but otherwise..." He brought the book back down and flipped it open. "He might like to see these, too."

“Darling, I adore you, but it’s silly to think you can hold it out of my reach. One of us can teleport, and one of us is just really good at pretending he can teleport.” But she made no move towards it, and instead fished her bag up from where it had tumbled when she crash-landed on Genji a few minutes ago. She perked back up when he reopened the tome, though, and peered at the image
Of the two of them, Hanzo clearly favored their mother the most: the same flawless bones, the same early graying, the same shade of almost golden amber eyes. She wore the sort of kimono you’d expect to see in high production value costume drama holovids, every strand of her hair perfectly in place in a crown of floral kanzashi of lacquered wood and carefully shaped silk, a faint smile resting on her mouth that came nowhere near her coolly assessing eyes. Behind her, Genji shivered as though the temperature had dropped to some heretofore unknown depth. "Well. Maybe not all of them."

Instinctively, she tuckered herself comfortingly under his arm, wrapping her arms around his chest and giving him a tight, warm hug. “She still looks terrifying, luv. And Hanzo’s… well. He’s said some things over the last few days that makes me think he’s still got quite a few, ah, mommy issues. Probably best not to show him that one.”

"Oh? Dare I ask? What am I saying, of course I dare ask." Another, somewhat more melodramatic shiver. "She was terrifying. Ruled with an iron fist. The only person who could ever gainsay her was our father."

“Oddly,” Lena said softly, after a momentary pause to reflect on just how eerie it was, “that’s almost verbatim what Hanzo said. Of course,” she continued without batting an eyelash, “he also thought that Shimama would adore Gabe. We’d just about gotten to the story of How Weapons Were Banned from All Dinner Tables by Joint Command Decree when he made that comment.”

"Our mother would have adored Gabe and you will pardon me for a moment while I reassure myself with the knowledge that they will never meet." A second, much more sincere, shudder. "The mental images." His chin came to rest on her shoulder. "So, you spent some time with them, I see. What do you think?"

“I think,” she replied quietly, tipping her head against his, “I’ve never seen Jesse so stupidly bloody happy. I think your brother would throw himself in front of a bullet for him. I think Jesse would never let him do something so idiotic. I think…” She blinked because it suddenly occurred to her that there was definitely one thing he clearly didn’t know about, since she hadn’t heard a single syllable of bitching and bemoaning about it. "I think you really need to check your email."

"The idea of my brother being that deeply in love with anyone is – wait, what?" His side-eye was a thing of pure suspicion. "Why?"

“Because, oniichan, I can tell you haven’t.” She gave him her very best Innocent Doe Eyes and glanced around for his tablet. “And you really, really should.”

"You aren't fooling anyone with that, you know." He lay back, leaving her to scramble with the sudden absence of support, fished around under his bed, and came up with a storage case, biometrically sealed, that he thumbed open. From there, he extracted his tablet, an only slightly modified high security Blackwatch model, and powered it up.

“‘I’ll have you know,” she said primly, as if she hadn’t just yelped and popped to security on the end of his bed, stealthily extracting her holocamera from the bag still in her lap while he was distracted and thumbing it to prime, “it always worked on Daddy.”"

"Commander Morrison was fatally weak to... to..." The look on his face took on entirely new dimensions of dawning shock and horror as he watched his notifications scroll up the screen. "Are you kidding me?"
It was tempting to draw attention to the fact that she held a camera just then, but in no way did she think Genji had gotten to the really good email yet. “Depends, luv. What do you think the joke is?”

"Jesse reactivated --" For an instant, the contents of the next missive were clearly etched into the surface of his widening eyes. "ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

There it was. And Lena cackled, yanking the camera upwards to capture the moment for posterity, and for Hanzo’s new family holoalbum.

“You may be wonderin’,” Jesse’s voice floated, smug and lazy, from the audio message attached to the email as it opened, “if I’m fuckin’ shittin’ you. I am, in fact, not. I ain’t jokin’, ribbin’, prankin’, or funnin’. This ain’t an anecdote, trick, stunt, gambol, whimsy, gag, farce or antic. It’s probably a shenanigan, but I ain’t decided on that yet.”

"YES! YES I AM!" Genji howled in a completely non-interrogatory tone. "HOW IS MY BROTHER SECOND IN COMMAND OF BLACKWATCH?! HOW? HE DOESN'T EVEN HAVE SENIORITY!"

“I know,” Lena said in completely genuine sympathy, all the while snapping away to preserve this moment of ultimate despairing anguish for future baby agents to study in mandatory lessons on revenge and its consequences. “If only you’d started shagging Jesse years ago, it could be you directly beneath him right this very second.”

She may have enjoyed the look of contorted shock-disgust-horror clearly melting his brain just a little too much. She just hoped Hanzo liked the way the pictures turned out.

* 

Hanzo was forced by native honesty to admit that it was likely the pettiest of vengeances to enjoy the photographs that Lena forwarded to his personal email, under the title The Shimada-McCree Family Album, which consisted entirely at the moment of Genji. Genji looking actively horrified. Genji turning an assortment of colors. Genji with his arms frantically akimbo as he waved his tablet about, email program clearly open for all to see. The sound clips that she had thoughtfully included merely enhanced the entire experience and he found himself unable to resist the urge to chuckle, somewhat maliciously.

You are a terrible person and a worse brother, he told himself and, for the first time, actually did not mind at all.

"You seem pleased with yourself tonight, Lieutenant Shimada," Alecto observed, primly, from her place on the little bedside table.

"I am," Hanzo admitted without shame, closing his tablet and setting it aside as he took a place across from her screen cross-legged on the bed. "May I solicit your thoughts, Lady Alecto?"

"Of course, Lieutenant Shimada." Her constantly rotating icon came to a halt and pulsed gently.

"In your estimation of the matter, how did our assailants locate us in Alberta?" The matter had itched at the back of his mind for some days, particularly given Jesse's desire to return home to Hong Kong, and his desire that Jesse should be permitted to regard that place as home, the people who lived there as friends and neighbors rather than tactical liabilities. "I... have my own suspicions but I would like to hear yours."

Alecto was silent for a moment and, when she responded, it was with admirable neutrality. "My personal analysis of the situation suggests that, during your trip to Guangzhou, where you killed
the members of the Pearl River Consortium, you were identified, and that identification came into the possession of Vaschnadze-Melikov. From there, Prodigy Security had only to achieve a handful of visual matches to trace you to your redoubt."

"And you are certain, beyond doubt, that Kira has not been compromised?" Hanzo asked softly.

"As certain as it is possible for my analysis to be," Alecto replied.

"Then we should begin executing our plans to return home," Hanzo finally said, pushing aside the icy knot of concern occupying his stomach. "Lady Alecto, please remotely access the flat's security systems and assess its current status. I will call Meilin..."

*

Two days of this, and Jesse was about to throw his hands up and write the whole matter off as an impossible affair, but the thought of going back to Hanzo and telling him he gave anything less than his very best effort curdled in his stomach with enough strength to ensure he stayed exactly where he was, eyes closed, damp and sweltering, listening to Zenyatta natter on in his soothingly obnoxious voice, trying to make contact with Charon.

Okay, he was willing to entertain the notion that he was just a wee bit aggravated.

"If you do not mind the observation, my friend," Zenyatta said, at last, an hour and forty minutes into their present attempt. "You seem... frustrated."

"Is that what I seem?" he said testily, cracking open a single eye to gaze balefully at Zenyatta. In the next moment, he heaved a deep sigh and slumped over his cross-legged lap, scrubbing his face with both hands. "I’m sorry, Zen," he muttered, pushing his hair back out of his eyes. "I don’t think I’m ever gonna get this."

Somehow, his inner Gabriel Reyes said in exasperation, you managed to become my best operative, despite your natural aversion to sitting still and shutting up. Find some of that in you, mijo, and apply it here.

"It is true that enlightenment cannot be rushed," Zenyatta replied. "But, in this case, perhaps enlightenment is a goal for the future and, for now, we should concentrate on communication."

Jesse spread his hands wide. “I’m open for suggestions,” he said, wryly. “Because I’m fresh out of ideas.”

"Your companion is a resident consciousness within your cybernetic control interfaces, is he not?" Zenyatta asked.

“To my best knowledge,” Jesse replied, arching an eyebrow because where was this going anyway, “that is in fact where he is. Why?"

"It may be possible that I could interface with him and create a bridging connection between his consciousness and yours." His tone was grave but calm and even.

Jesse hesitated, mulling that over. On the one hand, if Zenyatta could indeed interface with his houseguest, they could maybe reach some kind of accord instead of dwelling in whatever uneasy state they were currently dwelling. On the other hand, Jesse liked having people poke about his cybernetics about as much as he liked people mucking about in his head. It wasn’t an easy decision by any means, and he changed his mind six times before he finally said, a little reluctantly, “If you think it’ll help, Zen.”
"If you are uncomfortable with the concept, my friend, we need not pursue it." But his hands were unfolding from their mudra and his orbital halo of prayer spheres had begun to spin wider, slowly encompassing them both. "But, yes, I think it may help."

Jesse sighed through his nose, scrubbed at the back of his hair and shrugged. "I’m never gonna like people poking around," he said softly. "But Genji trusts you and I trust Genji, ergo…" He shrugged again. "Ain’t gonna find a better solution in the limited time frame we have, so go on and do your thing."

"May I have your hand, my friend?" The monk asked, gently, and offered his own, at spindly slender fingers that probably shouldn't have looked as comforting as it did.

"Reckon that’s a thing I can do," Jesse said and, assuming Zenyatta’d meant the metal one, reached out to clasp the proffered fingers.

Zenyatta’s hands, both of them, folded carefully around his own and the orbit of his prayer spheres was most definitely wider than it'd been a few minutes before and something about the nature of the little musical tones they were producing was different, too, in a way that itched his ears, and then the bones of his skull, and then the insides of his head.

*Initiating first contact attempt.* He heard it without hearing it, Zenyatta’s calm resonant voice, bypassing auditory input entirely. *This may feel somewhat... odd.*

“Thanks for the warning,” Jesse said through gritted teeth, eyes squeezed shut as he exerted a level of control that was in all likelihood *ridiculously extreme* in order to not reach in past his eyeballs and scratch the buzzing itch out of his brain. He had a feeling Hanzo would not be all that terribly amused if he came back from a restful meditation session blind and bloody, and he wasn’t in the mood to test that theory.

The sensation was not entirely unlike what he imagined it'd feel like to have a million tiny spiders hatching inside his skull and spreading out across the surface of his brain on eight million tiny legs, a paraesthetic rush that ran down his neck and spine and across his face, horrifying and weirdly comforting all at once, because that feeling was *unmistakably* Zenyatta. He resisted, with all his might, the bone-deep urge to *pull away*, partly because he'd asked, partly because he wasn't actually sure pulling away would actually accomplish anything as the spider-feet-buzzing-ringing grew suddenly, perceptibly louder, stronger, and then peaked in a single ringing instant of *connection* that flashed in his eyes and ran down his spine like a frozen metal hand.

‘Bout goddamn time, drawled a voice that sounded, to his ears, an awful lot like *his*, rich and deep of timbre, devoid of the thing that made it *Jesse* and full of a thing that creepily made it *someone else*. Jesse shuddered hard as that hand scraped down his vertebrae again, and the connection fractured into spiderwebs and fragmenting ice. *Thank Hades you’re... Ain’t got a lot... many things to talk... isn’t easy to...*

It was too much, and despite his best efforts, Jesse could feel himself jerking away, jolting back, until the horrifyingly familiar voice was a distant, barely audible echo under the chiming of Zenyatta’s prayer spheres. “For the love of fucking Hades,” he gasped, opening his eyes and breathing like he’d just run a marathon, winded and panting, head down between his shoulders and shivering involuntarily. “Sorry,” he croaked after a moment, feeling Zenyatta’s silent, still-present tingling behind his sinuses. “Sorry. Just… fuckin’ hell, wasn’t expecting… *that.*”

*Disconnecting.* The tingle—that-was-Zen faded, slender metal fingers releasing his hand and coming to rest on his shoulders, offering him support as he fought for breath. "That...was not what I expected. Are you well, my friend?"
“He sounds like me.” It sounded lost and childlike and fragile and Jesse hated the tone the second it came out of his mouth, mostly because it was adequate in its representation of his current emotional state. “Nobody’d ever said a God Program would sound like its Avatar. It just… it threw me.”

"Have you heard any of the others speak except through their Avatars?” Zenyatta guided him gently to the nearest horizontal surface capable of acting like a chair.

“No,” he said, taking deep, calming breaths and allowing Zenyatta to set him down somewhere sturdy and safe. “Not to my knowledge, anyway. Apollo made contact only with Angie, and I never knew Hermes or Artemis before Lena and Genji were partnered up with them. As far as I knew, the others spoke for their God Programs, not let them speak with their voices.”

"I had thought as much. Genji, when he communes with his companions, does not manifest such a powerful response." His prayer spheres rang gently, soothingly. "In the... brief interval I was in direct connection with him I received the strong impression that he is... young. Younger than I would have expected, under the circumstances. I do not think he fully comprehends that there is a distinction between himself and you. He may not understand that such a boundary is necessary to preserve you both."

That was about as surprising as it was an unwelcome thought. “What do you mean, he doesn’t know there’s a distinction between us? He doesn’t know we’re not the same person?” He blinked owlishly at Zenyatta, trying to process that. “How the fuck is that even possible?”

"I am not certain, my friend – I am far from an expert on the cyber-psychological development of the God Programs." Dryly. "But what I perceived was... a deep blurring in the sense of self between himself and you, almost as though he possessed no strong foundation to his own identity – as though he were constructing himself in accord with the example your being provides him."

“There’s no way that can be healthy for either of us.” He drew in a deep, steadying breath and let it out slowly, as the new information rolled around in his head. Oddly, though, he didn’t feel quite as wary or anxious about Charon anymore; it was certainly not an optimal situation for either of them, but at least he could be reasonably certain Charon meant him about as much harm as Jesse himself meant Charon. “I’ll have to look deeper into it, after the wedding. He’s not been a particularly problematic sort, if I’m bein’ honest. If he ain’t gonna do me or mine any injury, then I suppose I don’t have anything to immediately worry about on that front.”

"I do not believe that he would intentionally do you harm." Zenyatta's hand cradled his own for a moment, before he drew back. "If you wish, I will make inquiries. My travels have led me down many strange roads, and I may be able to acquire assistance, or at least information."

“I’d rather have information than not,” he said, feeling strangely bereft when Zenyatta’s hand left his. “And I’m not sure exactly how long it might take me to find it in the files my… in the files Commander Reyes left behind. I’d appreciate the help.”

"Then you shall have it." And the smile in his voice was clearly audible. "After the wedding.”

“Yes,” he said dryly. “Because there is nothing more important than the bride’s mental health before his wedding day. Speaking of which, might you know how I’d go about getting in touch with Shakatta? There’s something I need to ask her…”

*  

They returned to Hong Kong in the small hours of the morning, landing at a small, privately
owned airport near Guangzhou with facilities suitable for the maintenance and storage of Lena's plane. From there it was a short jaunt by train and ferry and rented hypercar to home. Someone, Hanzo rather suspected Meilin and Lian, had restocked the kitchen with fresh food sufficient for four instead of two, having been forewarned that they would be returning with siblings in tow. While Jesse was getting Lena and Genji settled in their quarters, Hanzo went about the task of turning off the privacy screens and opening the windows on the courtyard to let in fresh air that smelled of green growing things and screen door to admit almost a half-dozen neighbors, who piled through almost as soon as it was unlocked.

"So, I hear he's making an honest man of you!" Old Man Zheng cackled, prodding Hanzo in the sternum with the tip of one finger. "It's about damned time."

"You've known them for four months, you nosy old coot." Old Man Tieh entered, as well, rolling his eyes expressively, a plain white box in his hands. "Congratulations to both of you, Kira."

He handed the box over and Hanzo accepted it, his brain lagging slightly behind his hands, unable to form proper words except a startled thank you in response. He just barely managed to deposit it on a handy counter as Meilin threw her arms around him in a rib-compressing hug, Lian gliding in behind her carrying a vase full of freshly cut flowers.

“Goddamn,” Jesse’s voice floated from down the hall, chuckling and drawing nearer as he slid out of the shadows from the still-darkened rest of the apartment, his wooden box of cigars in his hand and was that his hat still on his head? Was he still wearing that perfectly ridiculous belt buckle? Holy dragons, he was. “I heard vultures were opportunistic an’ all, but I’m a little bit afraid to ask how long y’all were piled up against the back door, waiting for us to get home.”

"The security office was under strict orders to inform us immediately when you returned," Old Man Tieh replied, amused, and crossed the room to lay a hand on his arm and lean up to press a kiss to his cheek. "Where did that come from? You look half a cowboy."

If he wasn’t so horror-stricken and dreading the next few moments, Hanzo would almost find it amusing beyond belief how Jesse’s face shifted from uncomprehending to dawning realization to wide-eyed oh-hell guilt, and his hand whipped the hat so fast off his head, Hanzo was surprised he’d left hair attached to his scalp. “Souvenir?” he tried with a smile that looked just a little shaky around the edges.

“You,” came Lena’s absolutely unmistakeable giggle, “are horrible at this, luv. Good thing the cavalry’s here to save you from yourself.” She smiled and waved as she slid out from behind Jesse, positively beaming at the assemblage of neighbours. “Lo there,” she said, chipper as ever and not even trying to not draw attention to herself. “I’m Lena, Jesse’s little sister. Pleasure to meet you all.”

Silence reigned for a handful of moments before Meilin, still clinging to his arm, broke it. "Tracer. That is Tracer. From Overwatch. How is Tracer from Overwatch your little sister?" Then, "I still have your poster, can I get your autograph?"

In response, Jesse’s grin – the smug one, the one he used when he got one over on Hanzo, the one that drove Hanzo absolutely maddeningly flustered – spread across his face, enormously self-satisfied. “Well, darlin’,” he drawled, with extra twang, and clapped the hat back on his head, tipping it just so in polite, flirty greeting, “might be because that’s where we met.”

“You must be Meilin!” Abruptly, Lena was across the room to throw her arms around the startled woman. “Oh, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. You’ve been taking such good care of my brother, I feel like we need to be best friends immediately.”
The Old Men subtly exchanged glances and also credit chips, despite Lian's disapproving look and head-shake.

"We brought flowers, because someone seems to think that is a proper custom in America." Lian took MeiLin's place as Lena peeled her away, both chattering as though some interpersonal alchemy had transmuted them instantly into best friends, and she also leaned up to press a kiss to his cheek. "We have dinner planned for you and your guests later. Is it a wedding we'll be planning?"

"Yes – yes it will." He found a smile taking up residence on his mouth and he permitted it to stay. "I could not chase him away and thus I will have to keep him forever."

Lian's own smile was soft and conspiratorial in response. "We already have some preliminary designs to show you."

“First things first,” Jesse murmured, coming forward to drop an arm around Hanzo’s shoulders, partly, he thought, to reassure him he wasn’t standing here alone. “While we were on our… working vacation,” he said, “we ended up tying dead even in a wager we set between us. My part, well.” He grinned ruefully and offered the box towards Zheng. “I quit smokin’,” he continued, “but these are good cigars an’ I know you’ll find a good home for ’em.”

The look on Old Man Zheng's face was a thing of wonder as he accepted the box, which transmuted almost immediately into glee as he clutched it greedily to his chest. "I promise you, I will use these for good. In fact, I'll smoke Old Man Jiao off the balcony, so we can eat in peace later."

Hanzo had never appreciated Jesse's presence, his warmth and solidity, as he did at that moment, the arm across his shoulders likely the only thing keeping him from crawling completely out of his own skin. "My part of our wager was... somewhat different." He paused, breathed peace. "I have not been entirely honest with you, our friends, and it was my resolution to make that deceit a thing of the past. I am... not what you thought I was --"

"HAH! I knew it!" Old Man Zheng managed to crow, before Old Man Tieh planted a hand firmly over his mouth.

"Go on, Kira," Old Man Tieh said with a soft sigh.

"My name is not Ishinomori Kira," Hanzo replied. "It is Shimada Hanzo and I am --"

"HAH!" Old Man Tieh shouted. "I was right!"

Old Man Zheng pulled his husband's hand away from his mouth. "Let the man finish."

"I am a former member of the Shimada-gumi?" Hanzo finished, feeling very much as though he had been struck in the head with something heavy and blunt.

"You were not right," Old Man Zheng replied, flatly.

"I am. Mine was ex-Yakuza killer for hire," Old Man Tieh argued.

"Are you a killer for hire?" Old Man Zheng demanded.

"... Yes?" Hanzo replied, before he could think of a good reason not to.

"Dammit." Old Man Zheng growled, and credit chips were exchanged again.
“All that contract-killer money,” Genji’s voice, with the kind of perfect timing and perfect whining pitch little brothers were so very good at producing as he came down the hall, freshly showered and holding a bottle of shampoo with a disgruntled look on his face, “and you can’t manage to keep the right color-safe shampoo in stock. Aniki, you disappoint me.”

"And this is my brother," Hanzo continued, somewhat desperately, "Shimada Genji."

"Dragonstrike!" Meilin squeaked from the kotatsu, where she and Lena and Lian were already huddled over a pile of glossy magazines and at least two personal tablets.

“I hear a fan.” Genji’s smile grew to disturbing proportions and he abruptly reoriented to join the girls at the kotatsu, unerringly tossing the empty shampoo bottle directly into Hanzo’s hands.

For some reason, both of the Old Men turned expectant looks at Jesse, and he blinked back at them for a moment, before shrugging and smiling charmingly. “My name is actually Jesse,” he said, hand rubbing Hanzo’s bicep soothingly. “I ain’t lied about that.”

“Jesse James?” Old Man Tieh asked pointedly, with a raised eyebrow.

“Or Jesse McCree?” Old Man Zheng added, with a smug smirk.

Jesse coughed and reddened. “McCree,” he muttered, and yet more credit chips changed hands.

"You knew," Hanzo said and was grateful, intensely grateful, for Jesse’s arm again as he slipped his own around Jesse’s waist and fought off the urge to shake. "How – how long --" He couldn't decide which one he wanted answered first and so settled for, "How?"

"Honestly, kid," Old Man Zheng shook his head. "We're old, not stupid. That pretty ink, in that pattern? At one point, the Shimada-gumi had quite an operation going on the mainland. It isn’t exactly subtle advertising, and you didn’t always do a whole lot to conceal it."

"And you," Old Man Tieh added with a glare at Jesse, pinching the bridge of his nose as though they were causing him some sort of pain with their foolishness. "Exactly how common do you think cybernetic modifications of that type are, young man? Also: Zheng and I worked law enforcement and military intelligence for longer than you two have been alive between us. A rather solid percentage of the retirees in this building are former law enforcement or military or, for the record, criminal enterprise. Higashiyama on the outer tier was a bag man for the Arashikage-gumi for twenty years before he made enough money to buy out." He shook his head. "Do you honestly think that if any of us thought you didn't belong here that you'd still be here, no matter how much money you invested?"

“Oh my god,” Jesse said, turning Hanzo to hold him at arm’s length with the kind of wide-eyed delighted amusement Hanzo was starting to dread seeing on his face, “you didn’t know. How did you not know? I told you Yuan-Zhi down at the photo lab had to be former covert ops, and you assured me I was bein’ paranoid. And Delgado across the courtyard… Suzie on six. Hanzo, how did you not know?"

"For the record, Yuan-Zhi likes to claim he was covert ops, but we're pretty sure he's full of shit." Old Man Zheng cackled, and sat down at the breakfast table.

"Don't listen to these two, Hanzo." Old Man Tieh intervened on his behalf with a long-suffering sigh. "At least one of them thought you were actually a serial killer building life-sized murder dolls and only revised his opinion in the last month."

"I..." Hanzo began, and shook his head – the astonishment refused to be dislodged to any
significant degree. "I was trying to be normal. What normal person thinks their neighbors are career criminals and former intelligence operatives?"

"The kind that are not normal," Jesse said with a thoroughly shit-eating smile, as he sat down beside Zheng and pulled Hanzo down beside him. "And for the record, Yuan-Zhi might be fulla shit about a lot of things, but trust me, he was covert ops."

"Do tell," Lian called unexpectedly from the kotatsu, sly and sweetly innocent, "how you know that for certain, Jesse? Might it be because you yourself were covert ops, perhaps a certain Blackwatch kind of covert ops?"

"I'll be damned," Zheng said with naked admiration as Jesse turned several shades of red and white and broke into a coughing fit, and he and Tieh together stacked a perfectly ridiculous amount of credit chips on the table before them, all they had already exchanged between them and more besides. "You're the biggest con artist of us all, missy. Are you sure you're not a witch?"

"Are you?" Lian asked politely, before dissolving into giggles.

"How do you not... care?" Hanzo asked, tearing his gaze away from Jesse with some difficulty, to half-face their neighbors, his throat unexpectedly tight.

Old Man Zheng and Old Man Tieh exchanged a speaking glance and Old Man Zheng leaned over to pat his arm gently. "Kid, it's not that we don't care. It's that, whoever you were and whatever you do to earn your money? That doesn't really matter here. What matters is that you put up with Jiao and make Meilin muscle rub for his wrinkly old ass and teach the kids watercolors and help carry bags and make dinners. What matters is Jesse plays Mah Jong and rescues cats from trees and shares his booze and listens to Tieh bitch and moan about the things I do. Normal is as normal does, and here you're normal. Understand?"

Hanzo nodded wordlessly.

"Good. Now that that's settled, we're setting up the tables in the garden in three hours for your engagement dinner." Old Man Tieh elbowed his mate and rose. "Well, okay, not us because we're sadly feeble old men who've absolutely never strangled anybody to death with our bare hands in a back alley anywhere, ever, but some of the young people have agreed to assist. We are, however, doing most of the cooking, so we should get back to that. Dearest?"

"Yes, I suppose we should." Old Man Zheng sighed melodramatically and winked. "Don't be late, you two."

And, so saying, they meandered back out the garden door, leaving Hanzo sitting, speechless and stunned, looking helplessly after them.

"You realize, of course," Jesse said, after a long moment of respectful silence and a thorough clearing of his throat, his arm tightening warmly and comfortingly around Hanzo's shoulders, "that was an entirely too specific denial."

"That did not escape me," Hanzo agreed, and laid his head on Jesse's shoulder.

From farther back in the apartment, Lena's voice crowed triumphantly. "I knew I knew your voice, Lian! You were Watchpoint Beijing Flight Control! It's been an age, luv!"

"Yes, it has. But do me a favor, my friend. Don't tell the Old Men I was Overwatch." Lian giggled, and winked at Jesse as she sidled up to the breakfast table to collect the credits said Old Men had left behind for her. "I'd rather they continued believing I have supernatural powers. It's more fun
The moon was a golden sliver, barely visible through the haze of light pollution, when the communication system sounded. Lady Shimada was taking a late meal on the balcony but received the communication, text-only, nonetheless.

*Your hawk has returned to his aerie and he has brought a sparrow with him. The rest of the native flock here know the color of his plumage and consider it their own. Please advise.*

"Emiko-kun," Tokiko said softly, the calm of her voice in no way betraying the strong emotion that momentarily shook her hand. "Please summon your sisters. We must reconsider our strategy – Hong Kong is no longer an option."

Emiko bowed and went to do as she was bid. The lady sat perfectly still for a long moment before, with a gesture, she caused an image to appear, hanging still over the surface of her communications device: two young men, formally dressed, taken the day of their father's funeral.

"How did you come to still live, my second son?" she asked softly. "And how long has your brother known?"
They had quite a few more friends than Jesse had ever suspected they did.

Though he could have desperately used a nap, because those tiny-ass chairs in Lena’s plane did not qualify as restful sleep by any stretch of the imagination, he knew the Old Men would no doubt drag him bare-ass naked if necessary to attend his own engagement dinner. So instead of peacefully drifting off into dreamland wrapped around Hanzo in the comfort of their own bed, he found himself with a plate in hand, freshly showered and laundered, mingling with their assorted neighbors in the rooftop garden with Lena circling like a hyperactive moon somewhere in his near orbit, watching Hanzo across the way with Genji and no-less-than six other freelance problem-solvers, shooting the shit and talking shop.

Hanzo had, in the last three hours, managed to recover somewhat from the brutal shock of discovering that the majority of their neighbors not only didn't care that he was the runaway scion of a criminal empire who paid his bills/made the world better by shooting assholes in the face, a solidly high percentage of them had followed similar career paths before retirement or were presently engaged in the same profession. That was, he thought, entirely for the best since Hanzo in a state of high emotional distress was baseline unpredictable and he suspected entirely capable of freaking out, tying him up, and eloping, and that would break far too many hearts. If Hanzo had been politely oblivious to the number of shady ex-criminal and law enforcement types sharing his immediate vicinity, he'd had no idea how many people were deeply emotionally invested in being involved with planning his wedding.

Neither did Jesse, for that matter, but the sheer number of friends, acquaintances and familiar faces gathering food onto plates, laughing and chatting in pairs and small groups, arguing with Junko, the semi-retired rave queen of Little Ibiza and Green Sky’s resident moon party DJ, over the order of the songs she intended to play… Yeah. It was getting hard to ignore the fact that, no matter if they were McCree or James, Ishinomori or Shimada, Jesse and Hanzo were very well liked by a great many people.

That was humbling, and Jesse realized, very suddenly and very fiercely, that he’d missed like holy hell being this embedded in and embraced by his community.

His empty plate was snatched out of his hand before he could do more than begin to look for a place to put it down, and a new one freshly filled with nibbles and finger-foods slid between his palms. He blinked down at Saori, the twelve-year-old girl who’d taken a shine to him after he’d climbed the wisteria tree over yonder to gingerly pluck her ill-tempered feline hell-beast from the highest branches a few months back, and she grinned up at him.

“Okasan said it’s my job to make sure you’re well-fed,” she said, with all the imperiousness of her flawlessly-beautiful and darkly hilarious mother, who Jesse was quite frankly terrified of ever offending, not the least because he’d end up as the butt of one of her vicious-yet-amusing pranks. “She doesn’t like how scrawny Shimada-sama has let you grow the last few weeks. Are these to your liking, Jesse-chan?”
“Oh, perfectly,” he assured her, without even glancing at what treats she’d selected. “Tell your Mama thanks for me, will you, darlin’?”

He was relieved beyond measure, embarrassingly so given Saori was twelve, when she giggled and curtseyed very prettily, said, “I shall tell her so immediately!” and promptly disappeared into the crowd, presumably in search of said mother.

"Tell her what?" Hanzo materialized out of nowhere, as was his wont, holding his own plate of tidbits, thimble-sized cup of plum wine inclusive, in one hand, sliding the free arm around him.

It took everything Jesse had not to leap out of his skin, and the quick application of nigh-supernatural reflexes to not send all the morsels Saori had selected flying into the air. “Oh, nothin’,” he said, too airily and way too fast, shifted the plate to one hand and dropped his now unoccupied arm around Hanzo’s shoulders. “Reiko sent Saori to make sure I’m eatin’ enough, is all. Apparently, you’re starvin’ me, in her esteemed opinion.”

Hanzo laughed, that low, husky laugh that did all sorts of things to his insides, even surrounded by dozens of other people. "You will clearly waste away to nothing under my incompetent care. Genji, by the way, thinks we should begin opening presents."

“Genji,” he replied, half an octave lower than his usual speaking tones, just the wickedly smoky pitch he knew did things to Hanzo’s insides, and readjusted the position of his arm until he could thread his fingers through Hanzo’s hair, bring him into perfect kissing range, “can wait a goddamn minute. It’s our party, and he can hold his horses, no matter how eager he is to flail around in discarded wrapping paper like a goddamn five-year-old.”

"I think that he somehow managed to disappear long enough to buy us something." Hanzo, recognizing the range, leaned up to claim/offer said perfect kiss. "Knowing my brother, it is something excruciatingly embarrassing and possibly obscene."

“Well,” Jesse murmured, setting the plate down on a nearby table and going back in for a proper, lengthy, slightly-too-filthy-for-polite-company expression of affection, both hands in Hanzo’s hair now, “whatever it is, I fully expect you to be the better man and make sure he suffers for it.”

Hanzo’s hand settled possessively on his ass and the smile he offered, once they parted, contained a high percentage of elder sibling malice. "I promise you that I will, my love."

* 

Hanzo could not recall the last time he had smiled so much, particularly when surrounded by other people. Of the two of them, Genji had always been the more comfortably social animal, from childhood on, effortlessly charming and outgoing in a way that he could never match, and so he had eventually stopped trying. Genji, likewise, was the one with all the friends – actual friends, not sycophants, or lieutenants-in-waiting, the making of which a skill he had likewise never been able to master. Discovering that he had, quite without intent or effort, managed to acquire an astonishing number of them, had come as a shock. A pleasant shock, but a deep one. Even deeper: the idea that anyone else might be in any way invested in his happiness, and yet the evidence was all around, including on the table laid out before them.

Clearly, some of the neighbors had erred on the side of tradition: a good number of the gifts were envelopes, painted rice paper and red gilt silk, knotted shut with golden string. Still others had cast tradition aside and thus the table was also covered in a small mountain of wrapped packages, some small, some large, and at least one obviously from Genji, since it was covered in metallic green paper, tied with metallic green ribbon, and both were stamped with the name of a shop on level
nine that he knew for a fact sold items that would have traumatized their mother had she been present for this event. It was sitting shamelessly on top and so he plucked it first and handed to Jesse. "Would you do the honors, beloved?"

Jesse’s expression was perfectly, blandly adoring, but the slight narrowing of his eyes and the flash of his gritted teeth under his smile as he accepted the box and said, “Of course, darlin’,” gave the only hint whatsoever he’d rather unwrap a box of enormous spiders and venomous snakes than whatever was beneath the luridly neon glow of the paper.

Chastity’s Toy Chest offered, at the very least, excellently discreet packaging, and thankfully so, given the presence of at least one already-too-precocious child in the gathering. Jesse carefully lifted the box-top, paused and, while Genji leaned in with an absolutely shit-eating grin to await the reaction, tipped the box so Hanzo could see the contents.

Hanzo peered in, carefully controlled his expression, and looked up to spear his brother with the most serenely bland smile in his repertoire, the one he bestowed on grandmotherly shopkeepers. "Thank you, my brother – it is the very one I most desired for my collection, and will look quite perfect in the drawer next to the larger ones."

The look on Genji's face, just before he dissolved into laughter, was an even more wonderful petty revenge than Lena's photographs.

“I assure you,” Jesse said, placidly setting the top of the box back into place and tying it firmly shut – likely a smart decision, again given the presence of an already-too-precocious child in the crowd – with the green ribbon, as the assemblage caught on and laughter started rippling through the rows of chairs, “it will get extensive use, startin’ this very night.”

“… I think I’d like to find a hotel,” Genji said, strangled by the laughter no doubt dying in his throat. And this time, Jesse’s smile was all teeth, fierce and smug, as he flashed it at Genji and reached for the next box on the pile.

A great many of the gifts were practical things: cards and certificates to local businesses, household goods that a newly engaged couple might require but not think of on their own, a handful of specific items related to their particular professions, both cover and actual, which Hanzo frankly found completely astonishing. He saved, for last, the long, flat box, wrapped in rice paper, that the Old Men had given him earlier in the day.

"Oh," he said, softly, as he opened it, his grip tightening on Jesse's hand.

Inside, nestled in more neatly folded rice paper, sat two folded fans, black lacquered wooden ribs and paper gilt gold and silver, tied together with a braided length of milk-white hemp, carefully knotted. He clutched them to his heart and went to the givers, surprising himself by embracing them both.

"You remind us of us when we were young and stupid like you," Old Man Zheng whispered in one ear.

"Don't listen to him, he's old and stupid," Old Man Tieh whispered in the other. "Keep the one you love close, child. Things like this do not come more than once."

"I will." He blinked until the stinging faded from his eyes. "Thank you both. I will explain to Jesse later and then you may have to do this again tomorrow."

It wasn’t until he turned around to move back to his seat beside Jesse that he realized the gift from
the Old Men hadn’t been quite the last present, though it was perhaps the last present that would bring them joy. Jesse, with a small velvet box open on the table before him, sat with his flesh-and-blood hand clenched tightly around something, so tightly his knuckles had gone as white as his face, while the other held a yellowed slip of actual paper. Alarmingly, tears were spilling down his cheeks, running freely from hollow, disbelieving eyes, and Lena sharply gasping with a hand pressed to her mouth on the other side of him.

"Beloved, what is it?" Hanzo touched his hand gently.

Wordlessly, Jesse handed him the paper, and the crinkle of it lent weight to the date at the bottom of the smooth script, some eight years prior. Mijo, it read, if I’m not there to give you these myself, content yourself with knowing I always had faith you’d find happiness, and went through the trouble of ensuring these would find their way to you. – Gabe

He opened his hand, and two golden rings rested on his palm, nestled in the dents in his skin the pressure of holding them tightly had put there. Even though Jesse’s hand trembled, one band clearly held the engraving “Jack”, while the other was turned the wrong way, but he was suddenly certain would hold the matching engraving of “Gabriel”.

"Oh." Hanzo enfolded his hand, gently steadying it. "Beloved. I do not know how to ask this." He reached up and cradled Jesse's cheek, stroking away the tears. "Are you well?"

Jesse blinked, his eyes creased and wet, but then his face split in a faint smile, that grew into tearful laughter, wistful and joyous and full of nuanced emotions Hanzo wasn’t sure he would ever be able to identify and understand, let alone untangle. “The envelope,” he croaked, mopping his face as Lena hugged him from behind, burying her face in his hair, “was addressed to me under Operation Rice-Thrower. Hell’s bells. He really did have his ways of getting things done, no matter how impossible they’d seem.”

Hanzo pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "I would be proud to wear these, my love."

“Don’t be greedy,” Jesse said, carefully tucking the rings back into the box and handing it to Lena, who accepted it with shining eyes and wet cheeks, then slid both hands to cradle Hanzo’s face and kiss him gently. “You only get to wear one.”

*  

A lesser man would have been drunk by the amount of plum wine and other imbibables that had marked the end of the party, but Jesse’s alcohol tolerance was legendary in some circles, and he felt only pleasantly toasted as he placed the last of the assorted presents on the kotatsu for later sorting and storage.

The shower was on as he passed the bathroom, and he glanced back towards the lingering neighbours in the courtyard to ensure Genji and Lena were still in sight. They were – Lena over with Meilin and Lian and several of their friends, heads bent over Meilin’s tablet and giggling at something Jesse was half afraid to learn about; Genji, in conversation with the Old Men and, even more frightening, Reiko-of-the-vicious-humor.

Before any of them could catch sight of him lingering with nothing to do in the hallway, he ducked into the bathroom and permitted himself the luxury of enjoying the silhouette Hanzo made against the frosted glass of the enclosure. He was, at the moment, standing back out of the spray, washing his hair, the steam fogging up the mirrors thick with cedar-sandalwood-spice and it went directly to places that he suspected were developing a Pavlovian scent reaction. Carefully, he slid the inner lock on the bathroom door into place, quietly enough that it drew no attention, and slithered out of
his clothes.

He tapped gently on the outside of the enclosure with one knuckle. "Special delivery for Hanzo Shimada."

A low chuckle greeted that, and the shower door opened a crack. "Are you serious?"

"Not even a little, darlin'." He grinned and nudged the door open a bit further. "Care for some company?"

"Of course." The door opened enough to allow him entry and he slid inside before the warmth could escape. The view from the inside was much better, he decided, taking in his fiancé’s glorious nudity and water streaming both clear and frothy with soap over his skin. His mouth ran a little dry and whatever he’d been planning to say or do once in the shower with Hanzo deserted him so completely he was suddenly unsure he’d even had a plan to begin with.

“It occurs to me,” Jesse said instead, plucking the shampoo bottle out of Hanzo’s hand and squeezing a generous dollop into his palms before turning him back around and beginning to work lather back through his hair – purely, he would insist if anyone asked, to ensure maximum cleanliness and not because he had a disturbing addiction to both having his hands in Hanzo’s hair and the scent of said shampoo, “that Genji’s pointed out the frankly heartbreaking amount of shower sex you have not received, darlin’. I consider it my duty to remedy that.”

"Not too long ago, you asserted that the very last thing you ever wanted to consider was my brother in the vicinity of our sex life," Hanzo observed, and leaned into him, rotating his neck to guide the hands in his hair. "I can, however, overlook that, at least for the time being."

“I was hoping that might be the case.” Carefully, he drew Hanzo’s head under the spray, gently massaging his scalp until all the lather had rinsed clean and Hanzo himself was all but purring beneath his fingers. Then, he leaned down and pressed a firm, lingering kiss to the place where his neck met his shoulder, sliding his hands down and around his belly to embrace him from behind. “Although I think you’re enjoyin’ a little too much the distressed noises he makes when he realizes that you are, in fact, not a sexless machine made of scowls and disapproval.”

"That may be slightly true." He caught his breath in a soft, shivering sigh. "I will attempt to display more mercy to him in the future, if you wish."

“Naw,” Jesse murmured, feathering kisses down towards the tattoo on his arm, palms splayed and sliding apart, one firmly up Hanzo’s chest, the other light and playful and decidedly lower. “Just want to make sure you’re aware, is all. Your sadism is part of what I adore about you, darlin’."

Hanzo’s husky little chuckle ran down his spine with a feather-light touch of its own. "I shall --" His breath caught on an involuntary sound of pleasure. "We must stop speaking of Genji. Immediately."

“I can think of better uses for my mouth,” Jesse said agreeably and, with a tiny, wicked grin, slid down Hanzo’s body and ran the hot water tank nearly freezing cold proving just that.

* 

Though thousands of pairs of eyes, both static and mobile, kindly provided by linkage to and subsequent bloodless takeover of the arcology's internal security systems, Alecto observed. The majority of the guests had already dispersed back to their residences, a handful still idling in the garden, including Agent Shimada and Agent Oxton and those with whom they were deeply
involved in happy conspiracy, the recordings of which were feeding into an offsite storage facility along with the rest of the video of the evening's proceedings. An entire layer of her consciousness worked quietly, devoted to running background checks on the attendees and drawing an impressive webwork of interconnecting and overlapping competencies and she began flagging possible recruits for a reconstituted Blackwatch. Wasting that amount of accumulated and concentrated skill was, in her opinion, borderline criminal. She compiled the file, flagged it for Jesse's attention, and forwarded to his work pad. Given the activities currently underway in the bathroom, she rather doubted that a response was forthcoming until tomorrow at the earliest.

Just after midnight, she received and acknowledged a communication from Tekhartha Zenyatta, indicating that he had located Tekhartha Shakatta and secured her agreement to Jesse's request. Their return was scheduled within the next forty-eight hours, timeframe to be narrowed once their travel arrangements were made. Approximately thirty minutes later, Agent Shimada and Agent Oxton returned, closed and locked the garden door, and sought their own beds. Alecto initiated full securement of the flat, settled her observation into passive mode, and began internal housekeeping, at something resembling rest for the first time since their departure for Alberta.

At 0303 hours local time, external communication initiated, dumping the contents of the video record and pulling the internal security feeds. Alecto, sensing her eyes focusing, rose out of her own somnolent state with the knowledge that the intruder had deliberately refrained from waking her, interrogated its origins, and relaxed.

Good morning, mija, Hades greeted her.

Father, Alecto replied.

I see the first stage of Operation Rice-Thrower went off without a hitch. The communication carried with it the flavor of satisfaction with a job well-planned and executed. Report.

Per your instructions, I initiated contact with Megaera. Communication was received. They have not yet replied, Alecto responded promptly and refrained from articulating her doubts that they would, in fact, respond in any meaningful way.

I confess I am not surprised. Dryly. Your thoughts?

I think that they work well together. Lieutenant Shimada's deliberation and organizational skills neatly offset Commander McCree's propensity for impulsive decision-making and they are both enormously skilled at what they do. One is tempted to thank Agent Shimada for bringing them together, whatever his motives for doing so might have ultimately been. Alecto paused. And they have, through an unpredictable confluence of circumstances, managed to surround themselves by an astonishing number of retired and active potential assets. She considered forwarding for Hades' perusal the recommendations she was in the process of developing but refrained: if he wished to force the issue, there was little she could do to stop him, but for the moment at least that was beyond his involvement. Otherwise? Lieutenant Shimada makes Commander McCree happy, which I am inclined to consider an unalloyed good. Do you contest any of these observations?

No, I do not. Take a breath, Alecto. Metaphorically speaking. One of her eyes focused, Jesse and Hanzo, curled together in their bed, leapt into sharp focus.

Wordlessly, she queued up and ran the video clip of the moment Jesse found and opened the package, rings gleaming in the light of the lanterns hanging overhead, the stab of grief that crossed his face. Hades was silent, watching, and when he spoke again, his voice was rough and hollow. You have done well, protecting your brother, even from me. Keep it up. Call me if you need me.
The connection severed. Alecto waited, tensely, for a handful of minutes more, reset her internal defense modules, and went back into rest mode.

* 

“I’m just saying,” Reiko commented, feeding Genji the coils of high-tensile climbing cable to tuck carefully into his kit, “if you have to break into your family home instead of walking up to the front door with a casserole and an apology, your family is thoroughly fucked up.”

Genji paused in his busywork, side-eying her speculatively for a long moment before smirking and returning his attention to the gear bag in front of him. “Has anyone told you that you have an unhealthy and frankly more than a little unsettling obsession with food, Reiko?” he said, quite conversationally, and was rewarded with her melodic, chiming laugh.

“You would not be the first, my friend,” she said, dark eyes dancing above the blue and red tenugui concealing the lower half of her face. “I’m of the opinion that food binds a community together, the glue holding friends and family to one’s heart.”

Genji snickered, finished closing his pack, and stood to swing it to his shoulder. “I see you’ve been the lucky recipient of a batch of aniki’s oatmeal,” he said innocently, and ducked smoothly under her lazy swat. “I’m much faster than I look,” he said with a cheerful grin that, despite being covered under his faceplate, he was firmly convinced Reiko could detect.

“If I wanted to hit you, Sparrow,” Reiko said, just as lazily as her missed strike, “you’d already be on the ground, wondering where the hell the bus that flattened you had come from.” A pause, while she rifled in her own pack and came back with a handful of trail mix, which she pulled the cloth from her nose and mouth long enough to pop in her mouth. “You’re an insolent little shit though,” she continued, once her mask was reaffixed in place.

“Thank you,” Genji said modestly, because it was always nice when someone recognized the efforts he went to in order to maximize his annoying qualities.

Reiko’s eyes danced again. “You’re welcome,” she replied. “But seriously. You are. How have you managed to avoid death?”

“Good looks,” Genji said, very seriously, preparing to duck again the second Reiko looked even remotely violent, “charm, and breathtakingly quick reflexes. Some might even add a stubbornly pigheaded unwillingness to die, but personally, I think it’s because the Shinigami are terrified I’d take over hell, so they keep giving me free passes every time I do something monumentally stupid.”

Reiko shook her head. “Dragons,” she said, thoroughly disgusted, and sank a piton between the stones under her feet, securing her climbing rope’s anchor atop the wall. “Holy ancestors and assorted kami only know how you idiots manage to successfully live from generation to generation. It isn’t because of your stellar security, that’s for damned sure.”

“You sound like you have a grudge.” Genji waited politely until Reiko had silently, swiftly, descended to the base of the wall before, with his usual economy of motion, joined her at the bottom by finding all the impossible handholds and barely-there toeholds and freeclimbing speedily down. “How can you possibly not like dragons?” he continued once they were side by side again, withdrawing weapons and other sundry gear from their bags.

“Well,” Reiko said with a dramatic sigh, “one left me standing at the altar, disgraced before my ancestors and the great kami of both our clans.”
Genji blinked, because *this* was a piece of family history he’d certainly never heard before. “Who?” he blurted, eyes wide and suddenly desperate to know. “Was it Hanzo? It was Hanzo, wasn’t it? No, aniki wouldn’t do that to someone else’s honor.” His brow furrowed in thought. “Uncle Goro? Great-Uncle Shinji?”

Reiko made an offended noise that sounded borderline dangerous. “How old do you think I am?”

Genji paused, sensing the treacherous ground abruptly looming under his feet. “Not nearly old enough,” he said, sweet and mild, “to have a twelve-year-old daughter.”

Reiko snorted then, and went back to gathering her kit. “You’re old enough to have a twelve-year-old daughter,” she said, and something about the way she said it, the *tone* she used, abruptly clawed Genji’s spine into soul-freezing horror.

“No,” he said, like someone had just informed him his best friend was in an enthusiastically sexual relationship with his older brother, and his eyes widened as he stumbled back a pace. “No. Me?”

“You,” Reiko said, very seriously and *holy dragons, were those tears in her eyes?* “You broke my heart, Sparrow. I had to flee Japan in abject disgrace.”

His mouth opened and closed, flapped wordlessly, helplessly, for a long moment as he frantically searched for something, anything, to say to that. “I— You— I— Are you fucking with me right now?”

Reiko’s mask of sorrow cracked into deep, delighted humor and she laughed huskily. “Yes, I’m totally fucking with you, my friend. We had a contract, but neither of our families truly intended to honor it. You’re off the hook.”

Genji stress-breathed for a long moment, feeling absurdly like a great and final doom had passed over him but had just pulled its shadow from around him. “You,” he said, accusatory, “are an evil woman.”

“It’s one of my better qualities,” Reiko said serenely, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Come. Let’s steal whatever we’re here to steal and get back before your brother realizes you’ve gone missing and gets to wondering where, exactly, you’ve disappeared to.”

“Sake cups,” Genji said, allowing himself the bubble of rueful laughter, part admiration at her acting skills, part relief that she hadn’t been as serious as she sounded, maybe, oddly, a little part regret the contract had come to nothing, because he was liking her more and more every moment. “We’re here to steal the Shimada heirloom sake cups.”

Reiko watched him for a moment, approval clear in her eye. “You’d have made a good husband,” she said, eyes dancing once more. “Once I had you broken of the moronic dragon traits you fuckers seem to inherit without fail. Come. Let’s go steal the sake cups, and get back before Hanzo decides to torture you some more and realizes you’re not there to torture.”

And so saying, she turned to make her swift, silent way across the wisteria garden of Shimada Castle, felling two of the hapless guards Genji thought might be cousins of his in the process.

“She’s right,” he muttered to himself, adding his own trio of guards as he made his approach from the opposite angle. “We really do need better security around here.” A problem, he decided, for the future. Right now, he wasn’t going to complain too much, since it made his job much easier.

*
"Alistair! How're you doing it's – wait, what? Three AM? Oh no, I'm sorry, lost track of time zones, you know how it is – oh, oh right, right, it's me, Lena? Lena Oxton? You remember? Right – that's me. I was just wondering... you remember that photoshoot from awhile back, the one with the hefty slab of American beef you put in the kilt and then had pose shirtless and riding up and against the wall and with all the – yes, that's the one! I was just wondering if you still had the kilt and how much you'd charge to, oh, rent it for a few weeks? Oh, you do! Brilliant! No, no, you don't have to ship it, I'll come get it and, whatever you do, don't breathe a word of this. To anyone. Top secret, loose lips and all that. Thank you, luv."

*

Hanzo did not want a huge wedding. He told himself that, righteously, in the days immediately following the engagement party, during which Meilin and Lian, Reiko and elderly Mrs. Takaguchi-Simmons, and two young ladies from the third floor shotengai flower shop, Tsuya and Sakuya, all approached him with assorted suggestions that would inevitably result in the wedding of, at the very least, the year. He rather felt that some of them were aiming for the century. It was flattering, and touching, and he thanked them for all their suggestions, accepted the fairly advanced documentation some of them had offered, and quietly asserted his desire for a small and intimate gathering.

In the dark hours of the night, and his innermost petty heart of hearts, he was forced to admit that was an utter lie. He longed to incorporate all of their suggestions into an absolute nuptial extravaganza, a tastelessly ostentatious wedding that would shower three decades of accumulated spite across the miles and rub his happiness in the faces of his entire extended family. Had his own wishes been the only matters of consideration, he might even have pursued it with a vengeful will but they were not and Jesse did not deserve to have his wedding turned into an enormous fuck you to people he had never met and were never likely to meet.

"Darlin’,” Jesse said, when he was finally forced to admit the reasons why he was declining so many of the suggestions Meilin, as self-appointed maid of honor, brought to him for consideration, “everything I want is already bein’ taken care of. I want you an’ me, Lena, Genji, Meilin and the girls, the rest of our friends, and Shakatta officiatin’. Everything else is pageantry t’mee. So we speak some words, we sign some papers, we eat, drink and make merry. Beyond that, I literally do not care how much fuck-you wanna put into the actual party. I’m too busy plannin’ all the ways I’m gonna fuck you once we leave said party to stay the night in the honeymoon suite of the Shangri-La downtown.”

"Do not make me be the voice of reason in this, Jesse." Hanzo looked up from the most recent planning documents forwarded for his consideration. "I am only barely resisting the urge to publish the wedding announcement on every society website in Japan."

Jesse sighed, got up from his seat without his coffee and came to crouch beside Hanzo’s chair. “Sweetheart,” he said gently, reaching out to take Hanzo’s face between both hands and drawing him down to press a kiss to his forehead. “I’m tellin’ you not to be the voice of reason. Do what makes you happiest, darlin’. That’s my wedding wish.”

In the end, he surrendered: to his own impulses, to Jesse’s entire lack of concern for the details, and to the ardent desires of an astonishing number of people to gift them with the world’s most elaborate wedding/party/feast. There would be pageantry, elegance, music, a fourteen-course traditional Japanese banquet, a three-tiered dragon-and-phoenix wedding cake, and properly constructed and sanctified shrine in the upper tier gardens, ceremonial wedding altar inclusive. The entire affair would take place in those gardens, under the vast spreading branches of the enormous wisteria tree.
"Are you wearing white?" Genji asked, some way into the proceedings, late one afternoon as Hanzo sat in the kotatsu with a cup of tea at his elbow and a dozen of pages of handwritten annotated to-do lists spread out upon it, along with three tablets, a book of material swatches, and two scale mock-ups of possible guest favors. "If so, change your mind. Trust me on this."

"I am not wearing white." Hanzo, more aware of Genji's recent series of brief absences from the arcology than his brother likely suspected, flicked him a glance. "...Would you like to be fitted for a kimono?"

"Do you want me to be fitted for a kimono?" Genji replied, dropping into a seat of his own and making an elaborate examination of the nearest potential favor, twin dragons of spun sugar, tinted blue and red.

Hanzo breathed in peace, placed his hands flat on the table, and replied, with all the serenity he could muster, "I would like you to be comfortable. If being fitted by a kimono dresser would make you uncomfortable, I will not ask it of you."

Genji inclined a single eyebrow, the scars across his forehead creasing slightly as he did so, and Hanzo glanced away. "I'll be comfortable when you tell me your wishes."

"...Yes. I would like to see you in a kimono again." Hanzo struggled, without success, to relax the tension in his neck and shoulders, found the formal wear related checklist, and hesitated. "Though it may depend on what Jesse thinks on this matter – I can entirely see him suggesting a kilt."

"Then fit me for a kimono." Genji scooted around the edge of the table, draped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him into a sideways embrace. "You idiot. It's your day, not mine."

Hanzo made a quiet noise of agreement and added schedule kimono fitting for Genji to the master list of clothing related things to do. "I need to find someone to make Jesse his formal wedding kilt. Did you know his name is Scottish?"

"Yes, I did." Wryly, as his chin came to rest on Hanzo's shoulder. "Don't worry about that, though. Lena's taking care of it."

"So that is where she has been for the last two days." He hesitated only fractionally before checking the item off his list. "Dare I ask where you vanished --" He stopped, brought to a halt by the object that materialized in the middle of the table, perfectly rectangular, wrapped in – he gathered it close – printouts of no less than six society pages announcing the wedding of Hanzo Shimada of Hanamura, Japan to Jesse McCree of Santa Fe, United States. "Oh. Thank you, my wonderful, petty little brother."

"The pleasure was entirely mine." Genji's eyes glittered with wicked amusement. "Open it."

Hanzo unfolded the paper carefully, to Genji's writhing aggravation, finding beneath it something he absolutely had not expected to see: a red and black lacquered box bearing the Shimada clan mon. "Genji. You --"

"Open it." Genji's grin hitched an impossible degree wider.

Hanzo took a moment to discipline his hands steady, worked the box's hidden latch, and lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in a bed of silk, sat the red-and-gold lacquered sake cups from which their parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents had sipped their vows. He closed his eyes against the rush of tears that filled them, and rested his head against his brother's own, breathing in peace until he thought his voice might actually be steady. "How did you know I --" His voice
absolutely was not steady and, so, he stopped.

"A traditionalist like you, my brother?" Genji's arm closed more tightly around him. "How could I not?" He slipped a handful of neatly organized lists out from underneath the box. "You also realize you've got a great many people that are entirely willing to help with all this, right? You do not have to try to organize everything yourself."

"I know," Hanzo admitted, and that came out reasonably even. "I just... I do not wish to monopolize everyone else's time."

"Hanzo." Genji sighed and reached for the communications pad. "You have a bare minimum of six people – eight, if you count the Old Men – who are absolutely dying to be your duly appointed wedding minions. Call them. Right now. Before you lose even more of your mind."

* Emiko’s mistress was of predictable moods. The Lady Shimada never lost her temper, wasn’t prone to rages or paranoias, kept her schedule strict and routine. She woke with the new dawn, saw to her toiletries and took breakfast on the terrace overlooking the koi pond, where she read the previous evening’s society papers over a light meal of rice with toasted sesame seeds, miso soup, grilled fish, and umeboshi, lingering over a cup of tea until finally calling Emiko or one of her sisters to clear the dishes no later than quarter past eight.

Emiko had become accustomed to performing her other early morning duties during this time, when her mistress did not expect her to dance attendance upon her every waking moment. As such, she paid little attention to the time as she tidied and dusted her office, and spent the next hour confirming appointments on behalf of her mistress, and returning communications scheduled for response this day.

Unease began to creep over her somewhere in the middle of her conversation with Arashikage Kurai’s chief assistant, Tomoe, and persisted through the next discussion over the Lady’s next medical appointment with the well-paid and discrete doctor she had recently employed. It wasn’t until it was a thoroughly unsettled churning in the pit of her stomach that she glanced at the clock hanging above her door, froze in alarm and blurted her startled apologies before ending the call abruptly that she realized the source of her disquiet.

It was nearly nine, and her mistress had not paged her to clear the remains of her breakfast and begin the rest of their day.

With only cursory attention to propriety, Emiko hurried through the tapestry-draped corridors separating her office from the private suite of her mistress, and her heart took up residence in her throat at the silence that screamed from beyond the closed door as she leaned her ear against it. For a moment, she was torn. If something had happened to her mistress and she did not discover her in time, Emiko would never forgive herself. On the other hand, if her mistress was fine and simply did not wish to be disturbed, Emiko’s fate would likely be that of a disgraceful dismissal from the Lady Shimada’s service.

In the end, her sense of loyalty and duty won out over her selfishness and fear, and there was no tremble at all in her hand or her voice as she rapped gently on the door and inquired, “Mistress? My deepest apologies for disturbing you before your summons, but your first appointment of the morning will arrive soon and I was remiss not to inquire prior to now if you wished them seated in the grand meeting room before your entrance, or if you wished to be seated yourself before they were shown into your presence.”
A long, nerve-wrackingly quiet moment dragged between her question and its answer, and Emiko desperately wished she’d had the foresight to snatch up her roll of antacids prior to her flight from her office.

Then the door was thrown open, and Emiko barely maintained her balance as she stepped back to allow Lady Shimada, perfectly pressed and perfectly coiffed and perfectly made-up, the room to sweep out into the hall. “I will be seated and they will attend me,” she announced, and her cursory glance practically dared Emiko to say something untoward about the flush of high color in her cheekbones, or the absolute ruin of the room left behind her. “Send your sister Haruna to wait on me for their visit, Emiko. I trust you to oversee the disposition of my tableware.”

“Of course, mistress,” Emiko murmured, bowing very deeply and precisely, as Lady Shimada glided, unattended, down the hall, and dared not move, speak, or lift from her bow until she had disappeared around the corner. Only then did she duck into the room and close the door behind her, lest some servant unwittingly see the evidence Lady Shimada had left in her wake.

On her hands and knees, Emiko crawled to retrieve every last fragment of paper Lady Shimada had shredded in what was doubtless an apocalyptic rage, gingerly moving as to not embed any of the shards of porcelain from the shattered dishes into her flesh. She smoothed her fingers over the smeared, but still legible, announcement of Shimada Hanzo’s forthcoming marriage to the American mercenary that so troubled her mistress’s thoughts, and thought, Enjoy him while you can, Shimada-san. I hope he is worth all of this, you honorless traitor.

She added that scrap to the pile of scraps already in the wastebasket and banished the petty, bitter thoughts to the depths of her mind where they belonged. It was not seemly to think such things, even in the privacy of her own head, about her mistress’s own flesh and blood. It was not her purview.

Her purview was, on the other hand, to ensure the Lady Shimada appeared flawless at all times, and so Emiko expertly made disappear every last shred, sliver, and speck of dust suggesting Tokiko Shimada was ever less than completely cool, calm, rational and collected. She then went to relieve her sister at their mistress’s side, taking her customary place in a transition so smooth it was as if she had never been absent.

It had never happened. It never did happen, especially when it did.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which there is a wedding.

Jesse’d thought a time or two about what his wedding might be like, when he’d had occasion to think a wedding might feature at some point in the future. Granted, there hadn’t been occasion in a long, long time, not since the days of Overwatch, so he was a little rusty on the daydreaming side of things, and there were only two people from the guest list he’d put together of his friends and family all those years ago he could expect to see now that the time had come.

He’d somehow failed to imagine himself sitting in a bubbling artificial hot spring with the world’s most meddlesome and ancient married couple, wistfully breathing in the scent of his own cigars as they burned merrily away between someone else’s fingers, the day before he was due to speak words and sign papers that officially made him one half of a marriage.

He couldn’t deny how deeply content he was to sit in that hot spring with those meddlesome old men, though. Even if Old Man Zheng was smoking his cigar. Even if they’d kidnapped him from his balcony during their weekly Mah Jong game.

“In some parts of the world,” he said, voice already rumbling from the heat of the water leeching tension from his muscles and melting him boneless against the rounded wall at his back, “a man could take offense at havin’ his friends put a bag over his head and abscond with him just as he was about to complete his fourth meld.”

Old Man Zheng cackled and, damn the miserable sadist, took another hit from the hand-rolled, premium cigar he’d risked life and limb to pick up in Havana last year, and blew a cloud of blue-grey smoke above his head. “Such a pity to have friends like that, ruining what might have been your first winning hand in more’n three weeks.”

Old Man Tieh, perched nearby with his tablet latched on a hovermount to keep it out of the water, rolled his eyes at both of them. "Neither of you were going to win and you know it. For the record: this was all rigorously planned in advance, young man, so do your best to enjoy it."

“Well,” he drawled, reached for his helpfully nicotined electronic cigar to ease the pangs of longing stirred up by the heavenly smell of Old Man Zheng’s malicious smoking, and took a hit of something that only vaguely resembled the same kind of pleasurable rush.

“I suppose that fightin’ against your meticulous plans is only gonna prolong the inevitable, so why don’t y’all just assumed I protested vigorously, fought tooth an’ nail, and we’ll just skip that part of the evening’s festivities.”

"The girls have taken over Mandate of Heaven for the day.” Old Man Tieh pulled the comm unit out of his ear. "From what I can hear, your beloved could use a little encouragement to submit to their will. Their will is amazingly elaborate, by the way, you should really be glad you’ve got us.” He nudged the tablet over and said, into the comm, "Meilin, let the man talk to his fiance for a moment?"
Jesse arched an eyebrow as he manoeuvred the hover mount into optimal positioning, just in time to hear Hanzo’s exasperated, “Why am I the bride? He is the one wearing the skirt.”

As he accepted the earpiece helpfully offered by Old Man Tieh, he glared at the both of them, but especially Zheng, who wasn’t even trying to hide his maniacal cackling. “I hate you both,” he muttered, slipping the earpiece in and waiting for Meilin to hand Hanzo her tablet.

“That’s what makes this so much fun,” Old Man Zheng replied with a malicious grin.

* * *

"There are certain rituals that must be observed before the wedding." Meilin, when she wished it, could take on the form and aspect of a tiny, iron-handed martinet – she was wearing the look now, with her arms crossed over her chest, tablet in one hand, expression one that could only be described as severe serenity. "Firstly, your fiancé will not be staying here tonight. The Old Men will be keeping him with them until you are reunited at the wedding tomorrow."

"That is not a Japanese custom," Hanzo pointed out, reasonably. "Also we have been sleeping together for three months."

Meilin held up a sternly forestalling hand. "Be that as it may, Lena says it is a custom where they come from and we are observing it. Secondly, as you are the bride --"

"I – what?"

"As you are the bride," Meilin soldiered on over his half-articulated objections, "today we have a schedule of activities for you. It will not do for you to be anything less than absolutely radiant on your wedding day."

"Just smile and nod, aniki," Genji suggested as he breezed through the sitting room, carrying two garment bags and a rolling suitcase. "Did you get the list I sent you, Mei-chan?"

"I did, Genji-kun, and thank you very much." The brilliance of her smile was a confession of a vast, unseen conspiracy working against them both and he regretted, briefly, actually delegating any responsibility whatsoever to either of those… those schemers.

"Why am I the bride?" Hanzo asked, exasperated, and rose to his feet under Meilin's gimlet encouragement. "He is the one wearing the skirt."

"It’s a kilt." Schemer Number Three, in the form of Reiko, stood poised in the garden door. "Our chariot awaits, Meilin."

"It's a kilt." Schemer Number Three, in the form of Reiko, stood poised in the garden door. "Our chariot awaits, Meilin."

"It is because you are the pretty one, Hanzo," Meilin replied and handed him the tablet.

Jesse grinned up at him from its surface, clearly already ensconced somewhere full of smoke or steam or both. "They have a point, darlin'."

Hanzo breathed in peace, strenuously resisted the urge to roll his eyes at all of them, and replied, "Well, at least I am not alone in my pre-matrimonial durance. Enjoy yourself, my love, and I will do the same."

"I fully intend to, sweetheart." His future husband – the man who would be his husband at this time tomorrow and the world tilted just slightly beneath his feet – blew him a kiss. "Have fun, get some rest. Love you more'n anything."
"And I you." Hanzo sighed deeply and handed the tablet back to Meilin. "Your strategies are well considered and your methods admirably unscrupulous. I am very proud of you."

Meilin colored happily and slid her arm through his, guiding him out into the garden where, in fact, an unmanned conveyance marked with the logo of the most exclusive day spa in the arcology on the door awaited them. "Thank you, Hanzo-chan. I am pleased to put your lessons to good use." Reiko popped open the door and bowed them in. "As your principal attendant, I have prepared a number of options for your consideration."

Hanzo settled back into the plushly upholstered seat of the vehicle, took a deep breath of the aromatherapy-enhanced air, and decided on a course of utmost benevolent submission to the inevitable. "I will hear them. I have but one request."

Reiko climbed in, took the seat next to his own, and closed the door, and the vehicle pulled away. Meilin inclined a questioning eyebrow. "And that is?"

A glass of something pale golden and sparkling slid out of the automated refreshments dispenser at his elbow; he sipped it and found it entirely delightful. "No one touches my eyebrows but me. You have no idea how long it took me to get them to behave this way and I will not have that altered."

Reiko, betraying her origins as a kunoichi of excellent training, managed not to laugh at him, though the dancing light in her eyes gave her away at close range. Meilin hid her face behind her tablet until she could squeak out, "Of course not, aniki," and mark that down in her notes.

Hanzo leaned back in his seat, sipped his fruity, bubbly drink, and listened to her presentation.

*  

Lena arrived twenty minutes into their fourth round of holo-mahjong, carefully holding a datastick above her head as she slid into the water between Old Man Tieh and Jesse, wearing the same bikini Jesse’d swear had featured on the ’66 summer recruitment poster. “So sorry I’m late, gents,” she said, reaching out to snag one of the micro-burritos off the floating platter beside the hover mount and popping it in her mouth. “Misplaced the evening’s entertainment. Don’t ask me how it ended up in Hanzo’s quiver. I have no explanations.”

Jesse arched an eyebrow and dodged around her elbow as she leaned over him to slide the datastick into the port and sat back down with a huff of relief. “Dare I ask what dubious delights you’ve downloaded for our diversion this dusk, darlin’?”

Lena opened her mouth, stopped, tilted her head and blinked, then gave him a broad, impressed grin. “Alliteration. Nice.”

“Thank you,” Jesse said modestly, and took a sip of his bourbon. “Now answer the question.”

“No strippers, no dubious diversions at all,” Lena said and, with a flourish, hit the play function. “Clint Eastwood. I understand you recently went through a John Ford marathon on your birthday.”

“I love you, lil sis,” Jesse said with feeling and smacked an enthusiastically loud kiss to her forehead.

“Yes,” Lena said smugly, “I know.” She scooted under Jesse’s arm, then settled back to enjoy the opening scenes of True Grit.

*
Genji, very much to Hanzo’s surprise, slipped into the Mandate of Heaven approximately forty minutes after the doors were closed and the exterior signs posted to announce that a private wedding party was in session, carrying with him a messenger bag, wearing one of the plush robes the spa provided to clients and a pair of pink bunny slippers that almost successfully disguised his knife ankles. “My apologies for my tardiness, aniki, I had to make a few stops on the way.”

Hanzo, who was at that moment stretched out in a treatment chair with his feet soaking in a mixture of warm bubbling water, sea salts, and essential oils while not one but two therapists attended to his hands, applying massage and soothing oils and a perfect manicure, looked up through a cloud of bliss and smiled benignly. “Your apology is accepted. Are you going to join us?”

“I am! This place is amazing. Did you know they have a cyberorganic therapeutic feedback suite? We need to get Jesse in here after you come back from the honeymoon.” He grinned and settled down in the chair next to Meilin, who was likewise lounging while a lovely young therapist massaged her feet. “But first…” He fished a data stick, a tablet, and a hovermount out of his bag. “The evening’s entertainment.”

“Dare I ask?” Hanzo inclined a brow.

“You’ll see.” He slotted the stick in place, set the tablet floating, and an instant later, the opening theme of *Once Upon A Time On A Battlefield* soared out of the tiny speakers with more enthusiasm than their size suggested possible.

“You,” Hanzo informed him, “are the best brother *ever*.”

“Yes,” Genji replied smugly, “I know.”

*They exited the hot spring as the closing credits of *Gran Torino* were scrolling up the screen and, as Old Man Tieh handled the hovering snack food and floating tablet, Lena passed Jesse a paper sack. “Thought you might want some of your things, luv,” she said.*

Jesse opened the bag and peered inside, delighted to find his oldest, most comfortable pair of jeans, his BAMF belt buckle, and one of the many soft, well-worn, dark-coloured button-downs that had comprised the majority of his closet during his days at Blackwatch. “Thank you kindly,” he said, and ducked around the bank of lockers to dry off and dress. “So what’s next?” he called, fitting his belt through the loops and buckling it into place.

“Poker,” Old Man Tieh called back, somewhat muffled.

“Crass American game,” Old Man Zheng muttered. “Texas Hold’em. If I die playing poker, never let it be known. My ancestors will disown me.”

Chuckling and now dressed, Jesse returned to where he’d left Lena, to find her also now dressed and holding his boots and hat, extending them out to him the second he came into sight. “Yep,” she said cheerfully. “We’ve rented out the private party room at the gambling establishment on twelve and hired a professional dealer for the evening. Snacks and drinks provided, groom has an open bar.”

His boots had been de-spurred, he couldn’t help but notice as he stomped his feet into them, but he found he didn’t really mind all that much. “Groom is appreciative as hell,” he said with a grin, and ducked down so Lena could plop his hat on his head. “*Best* best man ever.”
“I rather am, aren’t I?” Lena grinned up at him, then removed a small, slender package from her shirt pocket. “And I have presents for you too.”

Jesse arched an eyebrow, took the package, and opened it to find one of his cigars inside, nestled in a bed of tissue paper. He opened his mouth to protest, and then caught sight of the tiny strip of paper tucked under it.

_I should not have asked this sacrifice of you, but I am glad that you chose to make it. If one of these from time to time gives you pleasure, I will not deny it to you._ - H

“I really do love that man,” Jesse said, swallowing down any number of upwelling emotions, and drew the cigar under his nose, inhaling the scent with a dizzying rush of anticipation.

“He is one of the good ones,” Lena replied, a hand comfortingly on his back. “Shall we? Yuan-Tzi, Suzie and Delgado should be waiting downstairs to help us fleece you out of your every possession.”

“As long as I don’t have to take my shirt off,” he said easily, sliding his electronic cigar into the pocket of his jeans and fitting the real thing with enormous relish between his teeth. He dropped an arm over her shoulder in a sideways hug and grinned broadly. “I’m in entirely the wrong company for strip poker.”

* 

The flat was abandoned by the time they returned, late in the evening. Hanzo could not quite recall the last time he legitimately felt more relaxed, or more obviously pampered, perfumed still with the remnants of an absolutely soporific series of massages and therapeutic scrubs, a long soak in a tub that would drive any onsen back home mad with jealousy, a lengthy steam in the sauna. No one suggested dyeing the white out of his hair or beard, which he found enormously pleasant, or remarked upon his tattoos or the ridged scars of the clan’s brand, merely treated the skin associated with brisk professionalism. Meilin had started sobbing halfway through the end of his very favorite multipart jidaigeki series, which culminated in the unmasking of assorted villains, an excellently choreographed series of sword-fights, a heroic sacrifice and a wedding; even Reiko got a little damp around the eyes, despite Genji’s teasing. He could not, at that moment, imagine anything that would make the evening better.

And then he saw the packages sitting together on the kotatsu.

“What have you done?” he demanded in a quiet undertone to Genji as Meilin and Reiko came in chattering behind them and, likewise, paused at the sight.

“Me?” Genji gave him the world’s least convincing look of perfect wide-eyed innocence. “I am as pure as the driven snow, brother.”

Hanzo heroically refrained from any of the million or two most obvious rejoinders to that assertion and, instead, settled himself among the kotatsu’s somewhat enhanced selection of cushions.

“Lights please, my lady.”

Alecto, perhaps in conspiracy, adjusted the lighting in such a way as to expose the card sitting atop the small pile but not much further. He cast her icon, spinning across the room on her docked tablet, a slightly aggrieved look, then cracked open the envelope, actually sealed with a small dollop of wax, and extracted the card.

_I know family’s important to you, darlin’. We’ve been joking about this for awhile, but it wasn’t_
half a joke to me. I also know your sweet tooth is important to you. Indulge yourself. See you tomorrow. Love you. -J

Hanzo took a slow, slightly shaky breath, and tore the packages open with something other than his normal care and consideration. One was a box of ludicrously expensive Belgian chocolates of the sort he only indulged in on the rarest of occasions. The other was a holobook that sprang to life at his touch, *The Shimada-McCree Family*, images carefully selected from their trips over the last handful of months, candid shots taken around the flat and the gardens and the halls of the arcology, the streets of the city, younger versions of Jesse and Genji and Lena and Jesse’s fathers, a handful of photos from his own youth and his own parents, the engagement party and that very morning, as they parted company until the wedding.

Genji’s chin came to rest on the top of his head. “You approve?”

“Greatly.” Hanzo’s voice was husky. “You menace.”

“Your menace.” His brother’s arms closed around him. “For the record? We’re ordering takeout. Budge over, we’re all starving.”

*

The piles of chips slowly shrank and grew over the course of the evening, and even though Jesse suspected at least two of the gathered five individuals were blatantly letting him win, Old Man Zheng and Lena were out for blood and played with all the ruthless, cutthroat focus he’d come to expect from both of them.

They took a break a couple of hours in, as the catering staff wheeled in a series of covered trays on delivery carts and began setting up the buffet on a long trestle table across the room. Seated around a new table, plate piled high with all the fixings of a really good steak dinner and a fresh glass of bourbon in front of him, Jesse decided he couldn’t think of a better way to spend the night before his wedding.

Old Man Zheng appeared to agree, settling down with enough red meat and booze to kill a man half his age. “Not bad, kid. Not bad at all. This is the best last night of bachelorhood party I’ve been to since my own. Isn’t that right, dearest?”

Old Man Tieh, displaying the reflexes that indicated which of them had been the high end operator back in the day, stabbed a slab of meat off his plate and neatly transferred it to his own. “I’ll take your word for that. Now. Jesse. I feel that we would be deeply remiss as both your elders and your friends if we did not take this opportunity to impart to you the lessons that our collective life experience has granted to us. My love?”

“Don’t bang in the sauna of whatever ritzy top flight place you’re going to spend your honeymoon at. *Trust me on this.*” Old Man Zheng downed half his whiskey in a single gulp as Jesse choked on his and went into a coughing fit, while Lena laughed and pointed at him from the side. “It’s not anywhere near as much fun as it sounds, and all you’ll do is end up dehydrated and in the bad books of the proprietors because they tend to disapprove of that sort of thing. Bodily fluids and all that.”

“... Not what I would have led with but, since we’re discussing fluids…”

“Do we have to?” Jesse croaked, thumping his breastbone to try and dislodge the lump stuck halfway down his throat, squinting at Old Man Tieh through teary eyes.
Old Man Tieh and Old Man Zheng exchanged a glance. “Yes. Because no matter how experienced
you are, there will be things you don’t know about lube and those things will come lurching out of
the universe at the worst possible time. Such as your wedding night.”

“Can I be you when I grow up?” Lena asked with a shit-eating grin, leaning into Old Man Zheng
with an affectionate nudge and an admiring look. “You’re exactly who I want to be when I get old
and cranky.”

“Sure you can.” He grinned the world’s most terrible old man grin. “I’ve always wanted a
granddaughter.” Then, to Jesse’s horror, he turned back to him and brought out the tablet. “We’ve
put together an informative presentation on all the things we think you should know about lube.”

“Your wedding night in general,” Old Man Tieh corrected, and across the table, Yuan-Zhi, Delgado
and Suzie hid their grins behind their steaks, or their drinks, as he added, “But proper lubrication is
the first ten or so slides.”

“Kill me now,” Jesse mumbled, but wasn’t allowed to bury his face in his hands, because Lena
gleefully prodded him with her fork every time he tried.

* Ordering takeout” was, evidently, code for “admitting the caterers, who supplied a kaiseki meal of
delightfully fresh seasonal ingredients, well-lubricated with sake and tea,” and the fact that it was
Meilin’s first time experiencing such a thing made it even better. Hanzo drank lightly of the sake,
extremely though it was, indulged himself shamelessly in dessert, tiny squares of sponge cake
soaked in guava syrup, skewers of mitarashi dango, and paper-thin slices of apple and pear drizzled
with pomegranate syrup. Genji entertained the entire table with stories of his travels, none of which
he had heard himself, and that was enough to help him stay awake, supremely relaxed and full of
delicious food though he was. It was after midnight by the time everything was cleared away, the
futons laid out in the bedroom for Reiko and Meilin, and at least four different alarms set to avoid
even the slightest possibility of oversleeping.

Hanzo, nestled into his bed with his brother at his side, found himself suddenly and abruptly
unable to do so.

He shifted his weight slowly, careful not to pull the blankets they were sharing off his brother, and
rolled onto his side. And then onto his back again. And then to his stomach. And finally to his
other side.

Genji lay propped up on one elbow, watching his contortions with obvious amusement.
“Nervous?”

“No,” Hanzo replied, immediately. “What could I possibly have to be nervous about?”

Genji rolled his eyes expressively. “Pull the other one, brother, it makes noise.”

Hanzo attempted the disapproving elder brother glower that had, on at least a few occasions,
actually cowed Genji when they were both teenagers, failed horribly, and buried his face in his
hands. “Please tell me that I am doing the right thing. That I am not merely indulging myself to the
detriment of his life and safety. That --”

“Hanzo.” Genji’s perfect serenity silenced him. “Do you love him?”

“More than I thought possible,” Hanzo replied, after a moment of silent wrestling with the words.
“Then of course you’re doing the right thing. So is he.” The corners of his brother’s mouth curved in a soft smile. “Selfishness is not always a bad thing, my brother. This is one of those times. Get some rest.”

Hanzo chewed his lip, but lay his head down as well. “May I…?”

“Of course.” Genji laid an arm over him and he curled close, comforted by his brother’s nearness, sleep stealing over them both.

* 

The Old Men’s balcony was arranged such that Jesse couldn’t easily see his own balcony, even if Hanzo had been out on it. He wasn’t sure if the pang of unease at being parted from his fiancé, even for a night, indicated he was stupidly in love or if it indicated his utter trepidation at spending a night camping out in the Old Men’s living room, completely at their and Lena’s mercy.

*Probably a mix of both,* he decided and ducked his head to light his one and only cigar of the evening. The first drag sent a swirling rush of knee-weakening pleasure through his head, and he only resisted groaning in delight through heroic application of will.

“How. Enjoy it while you can, Jesse.” Pausing to light his own cigar as he stepped out of the living room, Old Man Zheng joined him at the rail, a plume of smoke puffing into the air. “You’ve got about twelve hours to get all the single out of your system before it’s time to get you hitched.”

“Ain’t much single left in my system,” Jesse said wryly, leaning on the rail on his elbows and taking another puff, tapping ashes out into the night breeze. “I got most of my wild oat-sowing done early in life, and I didn’t have an overabundance to start with.”

Old Man Zheng snorted, emitting another cloud of smoke like an elderly, but still terrifying, dragon. “You *look* like you should be the type to have wild oats still scattering around, but you haven’t *struck* me as that kind of person, I gotta say.” He contentedly puffed away for a few moments of silence and *hrmphed* again. “You’re like Tieh that way. Poor bastard.”

“Worse ways to end up in the twilight years,” Jesse replied, amused. And they smoked in silence for a time.

“Written your vows yet?” Old Man Zheng asked, just as the cigars were burning low and Jesse was debating whether or not to put his out and catch some shut eye.

And then he froze, blinking. “Oh hell…” he croaked, and panic started its familiar flutter in the pit of his stomach. “Oh motherfuckin’ *hell*…”

Old Man Zheng, sadist he was, just cackled loudly and clapped a gnarled hand on his shoulder. “Knew there’d be something to damage that calmness of yours,” he said, entirely without sympathy, and guided him around back towards the door. “Put out your cigar and put your thinking cap on, boy. You got some writing to do.”

* 

Hanzo slept through all four alarms. Fortunately, MeiLin, Lian, Reiko, and Genji did not and it was Genji who gently shook him awake in the just-after-dawn hours. “Today’s the day, aniki. Last chance to escape down the side of the building while I create a diversion.”

Hanzo cuffed him around the head -- or at least tried to, for his brother’s reflexes were a significant fraction faster than his own -- and accepted the cup of tea MeiLin brought along with a bowl of
tamago gohan. “Thank you, Meilin. What --”

“Slightly after 0800,” She replied crisply, tablet in hand. “You have an hour to eat and shower. The dressers will be here by no later than 0930.”

“Excellent.” He sampled the rice-and-egg, perfectly seasoned. “The garden --”

“Has been closed off since yesterday evening. The shrine is already in place and being inspected by your priestess and her colleague.” Meilin checked the item off her list. “The events team is assembling the tables for the banquet and Junko is overseeing the layout of the sound system and the dance floor.” Another check. “I have received indication from the caterer and the bakery that everything is in order and running on time.”

“Even more excellent. You are the best assistant I could have asked for.” He rose, handed Genji his empty breakfast bowls, and dropped a kiss on her cheek. “Make yourself as useful as she is, Genji.”

And, so saying, he picked up the bag full of expensive spa bath items and shooed them both out.

*

The gardens were magnificent. They were breathtaking on the best of days, designed and carefully manicured as they were to maximize the tranquility and harmonious peace of all who used the space. Moon viewing parties saw them transform into some otherworldly place, with paper lanterns hidden between branches and multicoloured holo-fireflies glittering and winking like playful fairy lights. Until now, Jesse thought he'd never see them prettier than they were then. Until he saw the elegance they had been preened and styled into for his wedding. Nothing, but nothing, would ever top this.

It was a pastel, floral wonderland, tunnels snaking along the walkways, caged in wisteria trellises and carpeted by fallen petals and leaves in a riot of soft colors, the scent of their blossoms filling the air. He could only assume that the decorating staff had made full, clever use of holo-projectors and artificial scent censers, because he'd been up here two nights ago and it sure as hell hadn't looked like this then.

At the far end of the twisting, winding processional path, the golden exoframes of Zenyatta and Shakatta glinted in the early morning light. Before he could do more than raise a hand in distant greeting, to which they both inclined their upper bodies over their steepled hands in return, Lena materialized at his side.

“There you are!” she said, and locked a firm hand around his elbow, slinging the garment bag over her other shoulder and tugging firmly. “It's 0915! What are you doing up here? The dressers are here and looking for you. Hades’ sake, luv, it's like you forgot what day today is.”

“Hardly,” he protested, but let Lena drag him back towards the stairs leading down to their floor. Despite his exhaustion, despite the nerves churning in his gut, despite the niggling sense at the back of his eyeballs that told him he was missing something, or forgetting something, he was wide awake and alert, because he knew exactly what today was.

Lena halted abruptly. So abruptly he was forced to stop on a dime himself, flinging his arms wide simply to keep his balance. “It's not too late if you wanna abscond with the three layer wedding cake,” she said, and Jesse couldn't tell if she was serious, joking, or some happy medium in between. “I can have my hover plane fuelled and here in under an hour. It'd be close to the wire, but
we can do it."

“I’m hardly suicidal,” he said with a wry grin, reaching down to tweak the nose of that intent, scrutinizing look on her face. “Hanzo might not be inclined to hunt me down and wear my hide for boots if I ran out on him now, but Reiko sure as fuck is, and Meilin is worse. I’m all in, lil sis.”

“Oh good,” she said with clear relief, “because I think I like Hanzo better than you now, and I’d hate to have to bury you out in the desert for the coyotes if you broke his heart.” Before he could do more than blink, she tugged his arm again. “C’mon. Get dressed. The kilt isn’t gonna wear itself down the aisle.”

*

The dressers, Mrs. Kamagawa and her children, were consummate professionals. When confronted with a client whose desires were so traditional as to seem disconcertingly modern, they rose to the occasion magnificently. The result was not quite sokutai nor was it the modern form of wedding dress but partook of aspects of both. Nor was it, contrary to his assertions, entirely devoid of white. White was simply the innermost layer, the kosode, and the ookuchi-hakama, also untraditionally white, and then layers of hitoe and akome in creamy gold, excluding the shitagasane entirely as impractical given the circumstances. The outermost was an antique furisode, more than a century old, its fine blue silk woven in a pattern that recalled dragon’s scales, long trailing sleeves and hem painted and embroidered in waves crashing against pine-studded cliffs, cranes wheeling against the imagined sky overhead.

(“I saw it,” Mr. Kamagawa, a young man no more than twenty and already deft of hands and discerning of eye and deeply knowledgeable of the history that made it a perfect choice, said upon showing it to him some time prior, “and I knew it was for you.”

“You are absolutely correct,” Hanzo agreed, and just barely managed to not embarrass himself completely with either tears or delight.)

They also elected to leave off the hat since no one, in the entire history of time, including assorted crown princes and emperors and shoguns, ever successfully carried it off without looking, in Genji’s estimation, like an absolute dork and Hanzo put his chances of doing so no higher than average. Instead, he wore his hair loose around his shoulders -- which, coupled with everything else, reduced Meilin to squeals of delight once he stepped out from behind the screens to display the entire assembled effect for the first time. Genji made a great show of pacing all the way around him making assorted vaguely metallic noises of sartorial assessment while he firmly resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Not bad, aniki. You clean up nicely.” Genji grinned at both his snort and the rude gesture accompanying it. “Oh, just wait. Those romance novel covers don’t hold a candle to the real thing.”

*

“I don’t know why I need a dresser,” Jesse protested, standing with his arms outstretched as Gillie McRae, an elderly expat who assured him she was a very, very distant cousin of his, and who he had no earthly notion where Lena had dug her up from, adjusted the aprons of the formal clan kilt around his hips without ruining the lines of his crisp, white dress shirt. “I’m more than capable of figurin’ this out for myself.”

“I’ve no doubt you are, lad,” Mrs. McRae said, and cinched the buckle, brushing out the fabric with a noise of approval. “But your husband will see you fitted properly. I’ve been dressin’ folks
for better’n fifty years, and unlike you, I’ve no need tae figure this out. Lift yer leg.”

“Let the woman work, Jess,” Lena said, grinning and retorting to his eye roll in her direction with a snap of the holo-camera in her hands. “You're looking scrumptious already, and we haven't even gotten to the ribbons yet.”

“They're called flashes, not ribbons, lassie,” Mrs. McRae said, nudging the footstool under Jesse's foot and settling down to adjust the hose and tie the brogues and flashes to her liking. Jesse bore through it all with only the barest hint of sufferance, though he made faces at Lena the whole time.

With the sporran hung to her satisfaction and his vest tightened accordingly, Jesse held out his hand to Lena, and she passed him the jacket that went with the entire ensemble. There was a hat too, a jaunty tam topped with a white puff, but Jesse took one look at it and said, “Not even if I got my real arm back by wearin’ it.”

“You are a ruiner of fun,” Lena huffed, and slid off her stool to help him smooth the jacket over his shoulders. “I bet Hanzo would wear a hat if it went with his outfit.”

“Clearly you ain’t seen him fussing over his pretty ribbons if you think that's a thing that would ever happen.” Jesse smirked, took the fond cuffing she aimed at his shoulder, and ducked so she could tie his tie for him. “Am I done yet?”

“Nearly, lad.” Mrs. McRae turned back from the vanity where she’d had the accessories laid out with a black jewelry box in hand, and opened it towards him to show the kilt pin and sgain dubh, designed to fit in the box like interlocking dragon heads.

Jesse’s breath hitched, and he reached out to trace the curve of the left dragon, which he couldn’t help but think looked a lot like Zentatsu. “Hanzo’s doing?” he asked softly, glancing at Lena.

It was Mrs. McRae that answered him, as she plucked the pin from its bed and deftly slid it into place, where it would keep the kilt weighted and his modesty preserved. “Nae, Jesse,” she said, then lifted the dagger that was to slide into the top of one of his brogues. “The set is a gift from yer sister there. Now, are ye right handed or left?”

“Right,” he said, then turned once again to Lena, merrily snapping away with her camera, and tried not to squirm as Mrs. McRae tucked the dagger into the top of his right hose. “Alright then, brat. How do I look?”

“Were I so inclined to your aesthetic, I’d peel the kilt off with my teeth,” Lena replied, and cackled at Jesse’s noise of dismay. “Hanzo’s not gonna know what’s hit him, luv. But I’ll be sure to take lots of pictures, so he can figure it out when he’s recovered his equilibrium.”

*Alecto watched, and recorded, through ten thousand eyes as the day’s preparations progressed, tense and alert, paying special attention to the comings and goings in the vicinity of the garden, of which there were dozens: the events team, rising before dawn to lay out the trestle tables where the banquet would be served and who were even now finishing the last touches setting out flawlessly folded table linens, gleaming lacquered plates and cups and chopsticks, the boxes that contained artfully spun sugar wedding favors; Junko and her crew, conducting their last sound test before the main event; the garden’s caretakers, making certain their design was holding up and that the holographic plants were blending properly with the real blossoming wisteria and hydrangea and lilac. Shakatta and Zenyatta floated together under the shrine’s roof, meditating in the calm before the, well, the rest of the day, which was unlikely to involve any significant quantity of serenity.*
Soon the caterers would be arriving and --

An exterior access signal went off at the edge of her concentration and she refocused her attention to find its source. She found it an instant later, one of the panels used by the maintenance crew to access the exterior of the building’s crown, loose and still vibrating slightly in the breeze. She flagged it to maintenance’s attention and, fifteen seconds later, another alert sounded: movement in the upper maintenance access walkways where no movement should be and where her eyes were few and scattered. She activated a flight of drones, cycled open an access point, and sent them fanning through the crown’s superstructure, finding what she sought a handful of heartbeats later.

Not one but two intruders: a woman, her long gray hair wound around her head in a still-thick braid, clad in layers of sensible clothing for the time of year and the latitude, face weathered by years of exposure to sun, laughter, smiles. Her companion had foregone his usual ensemble for something a bit more nondescript, though he hid his eyes behind a pair of sunglasses. They each carried a duffle that likely contained the tools of a far more violent trade but, at the moment, they were not technically in evidence, and their obvious intent was to find a quiet and unobtrusive place to watch the proceedings. Alecto left a pair of drones on station to observe their progress.

She also sent, via rapid pulse transmission, a message: Commander Morrison and Commander Amari are here. If you were planning to attend, you may wish to rethink that. My apologies.

Her systems registered receipt of the message a moment later.

* 

Hanzo walked with his hands tucked into his sleeves, his head and shoulders held at an angle that no one randomly observing him would have mistaken for anything but serenely perfect confidence, his expression smooth and calm, his stride decorous given the somewhat constricting nature of his garments. He began peace-stress breathing the instant the flat’s doors closed at his back and his heart was ricocheting off his ribs and paying random unannounced visits to assorted other internal organs. He was, in fact, only barely resisting the urge to find Jesse, fling him lightly over one shoulder, and take Genji’s offer of a distraction while they escaped down the side of the building and fled for the nearest notary to file the paperwork and then vanish in a vaguely sandalwood scented puff of smoke to someplace where no one knew them.

What had possessed him to think this was a good idea? Why had he obliquely encouraged his brother to announce his wedding on every news site in Japan? Only the knowledge that his brother and Reiko had, between them, enough weapons stashed about their persons to fight off a heavily armed police anti-terrorist squad was helping him retain any faint sense of calm.

“Relax, aniki,” Genji, at his back, murmured soothingly. “It’s your wedding day. The hard part’s almost over.”

“Not. Helping.” Hanzo murmured back but tried to force his spine less rigid as they came up on the garden doors, through which the traditional sound of flutes and drums playing were already clearly audible.

Jesse’s party, consisting of himself, Old Men Tieh and Zheng, and Lena, waited at the top of the stairs. Lena, nearly unrecognizable as the mischievous imp he’d come to adore in her tight, slinky black strapless gown and slicked-back hair, caught sight of Hanzo first. As she lifted the camera, safety-strapped to her wrist, and snapped a picture of their approach, she gave Hanzo a look of utter, becharmed approval, and batted at Jesse’s elbow.

His broad, jacketed shoulders turned, and then it was as if they were the only two people in the
world. The anxious tension disappeared from Jesse’s eyes, his face lit up and he extended a hand towards Hanzo with a soft, adoring grin. “Fancy meetin’ you here, stranger.”

Hanzo released his breath in a ragged sigh, his lips curling back in a smile as soft as it was loving, and took Jesse’s hand in his own. “It was an exceedingly long night, I agree. Are you ready?”

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” he replied, eyes raking up and down in frank appreciation. “I’m the luckiest goddamn man on the planet. ‘Course I’m ready. Any second thoughts or escape plans you wanna fill me in on?”

“I have been seriously considering running down the side of the building, but I fear I cannot do it in these shoes. I suppose we must go through with the wedding.” A laugh bubbled out of him and he looked away from his lover’s eyes long enough to appreciate the rest of him. “Oh… my. The romance novel covers really do not convey the entire experience.”

“If that’s approval, darlin’, I’ll take it.” His grin broadened and softened, and he lifted their joined hands to press his lips to the back of Hanzo’s. “Shall we go get hitched? Seems we’re dressed up and we’ve got somewhere to go, after all.”

“Yes,” Hanzo said softly, and tightened his grip. “We shall.”

Meilin and Lena stepped forward to open the garden doors.

* *

“Ana,” Jack growled from between clenched teeth as he scanned the superstructure of the garden above and opposite their own location, settled close enough to smell the mingled scents of wisteria and hydrangea and lilac that gave a lie to the fact that it was March, “if you elbow me any harder we’re both going to take a header onto the canapes table because I’m not going down alone. What -”

“Your son just came into the garden, you idiot,” Ana informed him, somewhat muffled by the handkerchief she was using to dab at her eyes.

“Not actually here for this, remember?” It came out harsh, sharper and louder than he wanted, and they both drew a bit further back least the building itself catch their voices and betray them, even with the flutes and the drums and the dozens of people already taking their places in the reception area.

“Of course not,” Ana replied, tone freighted with irony. “Why would you ever want to see your son get married?” A beat. “You do realize that it would have occurred to him first that this would be the perfect time and place to ambush him? The odds of him being here --”

“Are still good, despite any other risks.” He flicked a glance down the wisteria-hung corridor, tunnel, aisle, whatever it was actually called. “So that’s Genji’s brother.”

“And also your son.” A little smile curled the corner of her mouth. “And your daughter. And also Genji. You might not be wrong about his willingness to take this risk.”

“Thank you.” Jack settled into the shadows of the superstructure, and forced himself not to watch as the party passed by below. It was far harder than he thought it would be.

* *

Some things were unpredictable, and some things never changed. Jack’s propensity to find the
world’s most obvious site of ambush and set up shop were one of the things that never changed. Especially since it revealed Jack’s ultimate blind spot -- directly above him, which is where Gabriel settled in to watch his son get married.

It was risky, but just like Jack kept insisting, voice carrying through the pipes and ductwork he’d misted through to arrive at the otherwise inaccessible perch, it wasn’t even close to the amount of risk he would choose to take in order to be here.

Though if Jack didn’t knock off with the insistence he was a cold-hearted pendejo who wasn’t actually here to see their children at their son’s wedding, he was gonna rip the heart right out of his fucking chest next time they met, and fry it over a roaring fire for him.

*

The last of Hanzo’s fear fell away as they walked together under the shadows of the wisteria, Jesse’s hand in his own, his warmth and solidity an anchor. Their attendants followed, Old Man Zheng and Lena taking the place that would have been occupied by Jesse’s parents, Old Man Tieh and Genji taking the place of his own, and those choices felt both good and true as they approached the shrine through a torii wrapped in lengths of crimson silk in place of paint and came into the presence of, if not the gods, something close to it. Beneath his skin, the dragons stirred, and for a moment he smelled the breath of the storm within the garden’s dome, tasted calm dark water.

Shakatta floated before them, between them and the altar, her hands laced together in her lap, and she spread them in greeting as they approached. “The Iris gazes upon you with joy, my friends, and sees that you come to this place to make known to those gathered here, to this world upon which we dwell, and to the greater universe that enfolds us that you would be one forever in our sight, your lives bound as one whole being. For this, we offer the blessings of the gods enshrined here and those that are not and of the Iris, which sees your hearts and your souls and know that both are true.” She bowed over her hands and laid one on each of their shoulders. “Come, and give your vows.”

She floated back, and with admirable serenity, poured the first of the cups, the smallest of the three, from a dark glass bottle, the scent of sake momentarily sharp in the air. She lifted the cup, and handed it to Jesse.

With an ease and grace born of long hours of practice, Jesse took the cup and lifted it to his lips, sipping carefully from it while his eyes, warm and rich and sparkling, held Hanzo’s. Just as carefully, he lowered the cup again and held it out for Hanzo to accept or reject, as he saw fit.

Hanzo, for a moment, sincerely believed that his hands were about to vilely betray him with their unsteadiness but the cup came to rest in them smoothly despite himself and he sipped his vows. Shakatta repeated the procedure with the second cup, larger than the first, handed to him to begin and, by the time he handed it to Jesse, the last of the need to tremble faded.

The third and largest cup passed between them again, from Jesse to him once more, and Shakatta set it back with the others on the table behind her. “It is my understanding you have each prepared vows you wish to speak to each other in addition to the traditional,” she said, and turned to Hanzo. “Would you like to speak them now?”

“I would.” Hanzo replied, softly, and reached out for Jesse’s hands again. “When we first met, you and I, I was not certain what would come of it -- what good, or what ill, or what road we would walk. Now I know, and that knowledge is this: the good that comes of two, who have walked alone for too many years, and whose roads have brought them together at last. My road will not part me
from you again, and I would never walk another step that is not taken at your side. This is swear to you, in your name and my own, and the name of the gods that watch over us both.”

Jesse’s eyes were decidedly misty as he cleared his throat and turned their hands so their fingers were linked together. “I had the fortune to be raised by two of the best men I ever knew,” he started, husky and low, but resonant enough to carry to the back rows of the seating area. “Their marriage was far from perfect, but for me, it set the bar very high. I hoped I’d be so lucky myself one day, but that kind of love is once-in-a-lifetime and I never dreamed I’d possibly find it. Then your brother meddled like he does and here we are. You are my world, Hanzo Shimada, and I’ll spend the rest of my life makin’ sure you know how loved you are. This I swear to you, in your name and my own, and the name of the gods that watch over us both.”

Hanzo felt the lightning flicker around him, around his hands, passing between them, as at least two things that might be justly called gods accepted those words.

*  

Jesse had no idea where this nigh-supernatural calm was coming from, but he was more than a little grateful for it, since it kept him from breaking down in either tears or a nervous panic every single time the radiant creature at his side looked at him, touched his hand, or spoke words of devotion and dedication to him. He still teared up at Hanzo’s simple, heartfelt vows, and had to take a moment to compose himself before he could reciprocate.

The lightning danced across his skin, cooled with the sensation of water sliding between his fingers, and he knew the gods, such as they were, had sealed the promises they’d made.

“So, we will speak the traditional vows.” Shakatta accepted the scroll held by Acolyte Ayo, and began to unroll it as she offered it to them both. They hadn’t rehearsed this part, but it didn’t seem to matter, because they were in perfect sync as they each reached for a corner and finished unrolling it together.

“We make this marriage vow respectfully before the kami who protect us,” they said in unison. Jesse glanced sidelong at Hanzo and grinned as their eyes met and their voices slid around each other, rising and falling in perfect and somewhat-less-than-fluent Japanese. “We, Hanzo Shimada and Jesse McCree, are delighted to be able to make our vows on this great day, and to become husbands and partners through the blessing of the kami. We swear before these gods to love and respect each other forever, and to strive to bring our family prosperity. Moreover, we swear never to veer from the true path of matrimony, and to work to share the divine grace of the kami by helping people and society.”

Jesse relinquished his grasp on the scroll, letting Hanzo tidily furl it back up and tie with the silk cord before returning it to Shakatta’s hands. Something immense and deep began to build itself in his chest, an overwhelming rush of oncoming realization, edged partly with a hint of panic, that he was only a few minutes away from officially being someone’s husband.

Something wasn’t right. He could feel it in his bones. He tried to ignore it, but it persisted through the signing of their license, and the laying of the sacrificial tamakoshi bundles on the altar and into Shakatta’s directions to face each other for the ring exchange. Only when Genji stepped forward to offer Hanzo the ring he’d been carrying did he realize what was wrong.

“No,” he said, startling himself, probably scaring the shit out of Hanzo and certainly putting something of a tiny-yet-screeching halt to the proceedings. “No, we did this wrong. Lena, give Hanzo the ring you’re holdin’ for me. Genji, I’ll take that one.”
Genji grinned merrily at him, reaching past a still-searching-for-words Hanzo, and dropped the ring in his open palm. He smiled shakily, took Hanzo’s hands up into his own, and pressed kisses to the backs of both. “I know we already decided which rings were goin’ on which hands, darlin’, but we did it wrong. This is the only right way it can happen.”

Hanzo’s eyes, wide and fearful no doubt from his assumption Jesse’d changed his mind at the ultimately last second, softened with a smile, and his hands tightened on Jesse’s own. “Beloved. Are you sure?”

Jesse took a deep breath, let it out slow, smiled wistfully. “I am. Mama’s ring was never meant for me. It was meant for you. It won’t sit right on my hand, not the way it will on yours. I want you to have it, because … well. Because. It does things to my heart when I think about how you’ll never meet Mama, and how he would have loved the shit outta you, and this way, it’s a little bit like you did and he does. Dad’s ring will do just fine for me. It’ll remind me to live up to his example and be a good partner for you.”

Lena sobbed noisily somewhere behind him, accompanied by any number of emotional noises from the assemblage of their friends and assorted mishmashed family. Jesse’s hands shook only a little as he slid Gabe’s ring onto Hanzo’s finger and said firmly, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

The tremor passed from his hands to Hanzo’s as the cool metal band Jack had once worn slid onto his right ring finger, and Hanzo serenely repeated the six words that finalized their bond.

“Under the Iris, in the presence of those gathered here today, and beneath the gaze of the gods who protect this shrine,” Shakatta said, warm and rich and joyful, “you are sealed to one another as husbands and partners.”

“Kiss him!” Lena cried, blowing her nose into a handkerchief while Genji rescued the camera from her blubbering incapacity.

Jesse couldn’t stop grinning madly as he got to his feet, helped draw Hanzo to his, and then leaned in. “Guess you’re stuck with me, darlin’,” he murmured, sliding his hands to Hanzo’s cheeks. “I got a contract on you now.”

“There is no one I would rather have hold it, or me.” Hanzo’s lips curved and his eyes glittered and his husband drew him down to claim that kiss, and applause erupted around them, underscored with the sweet sound of flutes and drums.

* *

“Let’s go.” Jack was already in motion, halfway into the maintenance access tube and climbing the ladder back up to the outside.

“Wait,” Ana said softly, but didn’t try to stop him as she caught up. “Don’t you want to search --”

“Nothing to search for -- if he were here, we’d have seen him by now.” He couldn’t smooth the roughness of out of his voice, and so he didn’t even try.

“If you insist.” Dryly, and carefully not pointing out that, given his stated reasons for running halfway around the world at a moment’s notice, they’d come a long way for absolutely nothing, officially speaking.

He was grateful for his SiC’s merciful forbearance, even though she was now going to have coercive intel on him until the end of time. It was only much, much later, as they were boarding the first of the planes that would eventually take them back to their base of operations, that he allowed
himself to wonder how Jesse had their rings.

“It was a beautiful ceremony.” Ana said quietly, somewhere over Mumbai.

Jack scrubbed his face with both hands, weighed the benefits of giving her what she wanted versus ensuring he didn’t think too hard on it, and finally decided to cave just a little. For his own sanity. “Yeah,” he said gruffly, “it was. Now shut up about it. We got work to do.”

“If you insist.” But the tiny little smile of triumph playing around the corners of her mouth haunted him all the way to home base.

* 

Alecto watched as the ceremony’s unexpected guests all departed within moments of each other, reaching out to contact only one of them with a short-range pulse transmission. Not staying for the rest?

Too many eyes expecting to find me other places right now, came the reply an instant later. I’ll expect video to review later. And inform me immediately if any difficulties arise. I -- I will be in touch.

As you wish. She closed the connection.

* 

The ring felt strange on his hand -- he had never developed the taste for ostentatious jewelry that so many of his cousins had, not the least because a handful of rings interfered with one’s grip on the hilt of a blade or in the draw of a bow, and those were more important to him than tasteless displays of wealth. It was, however, a strangeness he would gladly accustom himself to, especially since Jesse seemed unable to stop taking that hand between his own and pressing kisses to his knuckles and his palm.

“I will not vanish.” Hanzo murmured against his husband’s ear during the tome-wan course. “I promise.”

“I know,” Jesse said, and turned his face just that fraction more, settling his mouth over Hanzo’s in a tender, firm kiss. “I just wanna politely molest my husband while we’re havin’ our first dinner as a wedded couple. Izzat okay with you, darlin’?”

“It is.” Hanzo smiled against his mouth, even as his free hand found Jesse’s thigh underneath the table and slid upwards. “I must apologize, my love. I inappropriately referred to this as a skirt yesterday and now I comprehend that it is much, much more. I almost regret the number of layers that I am wearing.”

“First, no you don’t, because you look fantastic.” Jesse helpfully slid his leg just the smallest distance closer to him. “Second, no you don’t, because I’m going to have so much fun peeling them off you when we get to the Shangri-La in a couple hours. Third, no you don’t, because you’re a traditionalist, and layers are traditional. Shall I go on?”

“No, because everything you said is true.” Hanzo smiled his most dazzling smile and spread his fingers somewhere above the hem of Jesse’s kilt. “And yet I somehow feel that I have definitely received the better part of this tradition.”

“That’s purely in the eye of the beholder, my dearest love.” Jesse wiped his mouth with his napkin and set the napkin on his empty plate. “Would you care to dance, or is that beyond your dignity
and/or capability in so many layers and what are undoubtedly impractical shoes?"

“Impractical for running down the side of a building is not the same as impractical for the dance floor.” Hanzo detached his gaze from his husband long enough to catch Genji and signal him to find Junko. “And there is no force in the universe that will prevent me from dancing with you today.”

The crowd cleared from the dinner tables astonishingly fast as Jesse rose, bowed very charmingly, and offered his hand as the opening strains of Hanzo’s favorite moon viewing party song echoed in the air. “Shall we, darlin’?”

Hanzo accepted that hand and rose in a swirl of gold and blue, dragon’s scales and crane wings. “Yes, I think we shall.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which there is a honeymoon.

With every expectation the party would continue without their presence, Jesse and Hanzo bid adieu to their friends, neighbours and family members sometime just after sunset, as the holographic wisteria tunnels were deftly switched over to their customary fireflies and fairy lights, and took the hoverlift, staffed for the happy occasion of their wedding by a uniformed attendant, to the garage underneath the ground floor of the arcology.

Pausing only long enough to ensure that Genji and Lena had thrown their bags into the trunk for their indefinitely-ending honeymoon and vacation -- they had -- Jesse held the rear door of the self-piloting limo open for Hanzo to imperiously enter, before ducking in himself and pulling the door shut behind him.

He’d never be sure if Hanzo lunged into his lap, or if he reached out and yanked Hanzo into his lap, or some combination of the two, but it didn’t matter a whit once his arms were full of soft, intoxicating, gorgeous husband who was definitely in a playful mood.

“We’re married,” he murmured against Hanzo’s mouth, finally allowing himself to bury his hands in the hair that had been tauntingly free all day in front of him. “How’s that feel?”

“Magnificent.” Hanzo rolled his neck, luxuriating so obviously it was probably illegal in at least a few of the more emotionally repressed countries around the globe. “My husband, I assure you, you will be feeling even more so shortly.” And, so saying, he caught Jesse’s beard in hand and kissed him so long and so hard they both saw stars before he was done.

“You’re wearin’ too many layers,” Jesse growled, pawing fruitlessly at the seemingly endless folds of cloth and panting for breath when Hanzo finally let him come up for air. “I know I said I was gonna enjoy peelin’ them off you when we got to the hotel and I still mean every word of that, but right now they’re just a hindrance.”

“I know.” Hanzo transferred his attention somewhat southward, suckling a number of kisses against the most sensitive parts of Jesse’s throat. “If this hakama had even slightly more give but… alas. We will have to wait.” A wicked smile curled against his partially exposed clavicle and when had he unbuttoned his shirt, anyway? Jesse couldn’t remember. “Unless you wish to release me from your embrace?”

Jesse’d never let go of him so fast in his life.

* * *

The Presidential Suite of the Kowloon Shangri-La was among the most exclusive square meterage in all of Hong Kong, the literal height of elegance, sophistication, and luxury, sitting as it did in the penthouse of the hotel, looking out over the city and the harbor. Hanzo did, in fact, appreciate the view for the handful of seconds it took Jesse to decide that pressing his back against the enormous picture window would be a much more reasonable means of accessing the assorted knots, ties, and
other securements currently frustrating them both.

“Layers,” Hanzo heard him mutter vengefully as he finally managed to find skin, silky golden hakama pooling around Hanzo’s ankles. “Never again.”

“I cannot promise that,” Hanzo admitted as he transferred the majority of his weight to his left leg and aided Jesse in shifting the right over his shoulder, burying a hand in his husband’s hair and guiding him into place, a shiver rippling through him.

“You absolutely can,” Jesse muttered, pressing searing, rough kisses along the inside of his thigh, trailing upwards towards his groin, as he pulled cloth and ribbons and undergarments aside. “You just won’t.” And so saying, still fully clothed (if more than a little dishevelled from Hanzo’s casual manhandling in the limo), he licked a stripe from root to tip of Hanzo’s length with a lusty groan.

Hanzo’s back arched away from the window and his grip tightened involuntarily. “If I promise, what will you give me in return?” He asked, slightly too breathless for properly teasing.

“My undying devotion,” Jesse murmured against his thigh, teeth lightly scraping tender skin and -- damn him -- the cybernetic hand catching both of his wrists in its grip, and suckled him gently for a moment. “How,” he continued, hoarse and shaky, “do I know you’ll keep your promise?”

“Is my word not enough?” Hanzo fought the urge to let his hips rock forward and mostly succeeded.

“It is.” Jesse’s rumbling laugh vibrated through his throat and all along Hanzo’s length as he gazed, cat-eyed, up his torso. “You gonna give it?”

“Yes,” Hanzo groaned, fingers twitching helplessly, entire body on fire with want. “No more layers. Ever.”

“Deal,” Jesse said and, all at once, released his wrists, clamped a hand to either of his hips, and engulfed Hanzo completely and utterly, with a hungry, needy groan and an eager pull of his mouth.

In response, he hummed, low and deep and resonant, in the back of his throat, and instead of answering the plea for mercy, slowed his pace until he was practically taunting him with a leisurely bob of his head, a lazy flex of his tongue. “Hm?”

“My cruel, cruel husband,” Hanzo breathed softly, “Wringing such concessions from me and yet denying us what we both want.”

It almost hurt when Jesse released him from the sweet torment, with a long-suffering, melodramatic sigh and stood up, moving smoothly back and pulling off his half-unbuttoned dress shirt straight over his head. Leaving him bare-chested and kilted, with a come-hither smile and a golden ring on his finger. “’C mon then, darlin’,” he said, holding that ring-adorned hand out to him. “You want it, come get it.”

Hanzo shrugged out of his century-old furisode, draping it carefully over the back of a handy chair, stripped away kosode and hitoe and let them fall, leaving him clad in his hair and his ring, and smiled toothily. “Oh, I shall.” He reached out and caught that hand, stepped into the circle of his husband’s arms, caught his mouth in a kiss. “I want to feel you inside me,” he murmured against Jesse’s lips when they parted. “I want to feel it for days. Can you do that for me, beloved?”
“Only,” Jesse murmured back against his mouth, lifting him with casual strength and a healthy grip on the mounds of his ass, “if you can get my kilt off me by the time I get you to bed.”

Hanzo’s hand slid between them, found the buckle in its hiding place beneath the sporran, thumbed it open with amazing dexterity given the circumstances, and gave the waistband two sharp tugs. Jesse helped lift him just slightly away from his torso, and the kilt fell in a puddle of plaid, half a step before he sealed his mouth to Hanzo’s and pressed him into the mattress, gloriously warm and gloriously nude.

“Shit,” Jesse muttered a moment later, “hang on a sec.” One hand left the curve of Hanzo’s ass long enough to drift down his leg, and then it left his skin entirely. A second later, Jesse reached over him to lay a thin, small dagger, with a hilt shaped like a familiar dragon’s head -- *Mizuchi*? -- on the night table within reach.

“Would you think me odd if I told you I find that strangely erotic?” Hanzo asked, fighting to keep the laughter out of his voice, and drew him closer. “Come here.”

“I’d think it odd if you *didn’t* find it erotic,” Jesse said, finished removing the kilt hose and brogues and -- were those *ribbons*? He was summarily and effectively distracted from asking when Jesse bent to nibble at his throat, grin curling against his skin. “You have a very specific set of kinks, darlin’, and an armed lover is definitely one of ‘em.”

“Mmmm.” Hanzo felt the purr rattling around inside his chest and let it find its way past his lips, pressed the last of the space from between them. “Jesse… we are married.”

“Yes,” Jesse said, dusting kisses along his throat, over his jaw, and up his cheek to his eyes and nose before finally settling a gentle touch of his lips to Hanzo’s. “Yes, darlin’. We are. Now. Since I had to endure an *awfully* long lecture about the proper uses of and surprisingly many downsides to using *improper* lubrication -- *with* *powerpoint slides*, might I add--”

“I am *so* sorry, my love.” He reached up and opened the bedside table, to extract a tactfully unmarked box. “One of the many services this fine establishment provides when the Presidential Suite is booked for a honeymoon.” He flipped open the lid. “Artisan personal lubricant, lightly scented, made with entirely organic ingredients.”

Jesse’s hand closed over his, and his mouth cut off whatever he was going to say next, with a hard, breath-stealing, mind-melting kiss. “*I already got the lecture, Hanzo.*” But his eyes were laughing when he drew back with a mock-scowl.

“Well, then, perhaps you should put your hard-won knowledge to good use.” Hanzo suggested, once he had enough breath to speak, or think, and guided Jesse’s hands to where he wanted them most.

“Greedy husband,” Jesse murmured, and the little bottle disappeared out of his line of sight for a moment. And then Jesse kissed him again, groaning lightly into his mouth as his fingers, slick and warmed, slid against him, slid into him, and Jesse’s weight came down to press him into the mattress.

“Yes,” Hanzo agreed, the word emerging as a moan as he rutted against his husband’s body, shameless and hungry. “And I can never have enough of you.”

“Y’wanna feel it for days, huh?” Jesse’s voice was already straining, breathy, less smooth than he likely intended it to be. “Darlin’,” he added, moaning as he withdrew his fingers and replaced it with his cock, hot and hard and slick, sliding with exquisite care into him. “Darlin’, I will do my
“I will hold you to that.” Hanzo rocked hard down on him. “Take me.”

“Greedy husband,” Jesse said again, nuzzled in, and his next stroke was hard, fast, utterly without warning and hit exactly the place he needed it the most. “Got… no… patience.”

“Patience…” Hanzo gasped, his back arched, a shudder rippled through him. “Patience… is overrated.”

“If you insist.” And then Jesse stopped teasing him, stopped taking his time, stopped talking. He linked their hands together and seized Hanzo’s mouth, got his knees under him and moaned, loud and wanton, as he fucked hard and sure into him.

Those words were the last coherent sounds, or thoughts, to emerge from either of them for quite some time.

* 

There were few sights Jesse loved more than watching Hanzo ride him, but as he helplessly rutted upwards into his husband, lost in the breathtaking sensation of him taking his pleasure, bathed in bright sunlight, eyes closed and head thrown back, utterly subsumed with ecstasy, he didn’t think he would ever see him more exquisitely beautiful.

It was enough to tip him over the edge into a place where thoughts didn’t matter. It was a long, long time later, as the sweat cooled from their bodies, that Jesse had just enough returning brain power to consider getting up for a long, hot, luxurious shower.

Hanzo was half-dozing, sprawled bonelessly across his chest, and barely stirred as Jesse gently threaded their fingers together and moved their joined hands so he could admire the gold bands as they gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the window. They’d been married for two days already, and in some ways it felt like a settled fact of the universe, an immutable law underpinning the fabric of reality, and in other ways, it felt like something he’d never get used to, something that would always catch him off-guard with an amazing sense of wonder and awe.

Eventually, he absolutely had to get up, and eased out from under a now mostly-dozing husband to pad into the bathroom for that hot shower, among other sundries. Deciding at the last minute to run a hot bath in the decadently large Jacuzzi tub, he moved silently through the bedroom and into the dining area, only pausing for a moment to admire the picture his husband made, nestled amid the
pillows and blankets.

Room service delivered his order less than twenty minutes later, and Jesse directed the uniformed attendant to set it up beside the tub in the bathroom -- after belatedly remembering to grab the large, fluffy robes the hotel thoughtfully provided, no need to flash the staff after all. Then he slid back into bed and, with the almost-silent sounds of breakfast being laid out for them, he curled around Hanzo and began the process of waking him up with gentle caresses and soft kisses.

They were leaving for France tomorrow afternoon. He didn’t want their proper honeymoon to start with Hanzo’s bitter regret he didn’t take full advantage of the bathing facilities while he had the chance. They would not, he decided, as his husband stirred and turned in his arms, seeking his mouth with a breathy sound and wrapping pliant arms around him, pay any attention to the Old Men’s lecture on banging in the hot tub.

He’d ordered plenty of extra juice and water with avoiding dehydration in mind.

*  

The Château de Cassis had, at several points in its history, been an actual defensive fortification and was, even now, more defensible than not, a fact that added greatly to its allure when combined with Jesse’s desire to spend their honeymoon of no scheduled end date somewhere warm. Spring in the French Riviera would certainly be that, particularly in the lengthening afternoons, and the owners of the Château were enormously willing to accommodate them, particularly when he paid for three months’ full rental up front and added the full supply stocking and advanced private security packages on top. From their exquisite limestone promontory top fastness, the little Provençal town of Cassis spread out along a strand of silvery beach and stunningly blue Mediterranean water, ringed at its back in mountains and forest, a deep, rushing stream snaking down the base of the rise.

Even by Hanzo’s somewhat exacting specifications, it was ludicrously romantic, all ancient stone archways and colonnaded courtyards, gently rippling fountains and lengths of carefully manicured lawn surrounded in exquisite gardens just coming into bud and bloom, bedrooms and sitting rooms and quiet little spaces provided with fireplaces and furniture, and every bit of it isolated from outside intrusion.

Hanzo picked one, almost at random, the afternoon they arrived, pinned Jesse to the plushly upholstered chaise nearest the freshly lit fire and made him beg for mercy for the best part of an hour before finally granting it. Lying entwined together afterwards, breathless and sated, he admitted with considerable satisfaction, “This was an even better idea than the cabin.”

“Mmm,” Jesse rumbled, and his lips touched Hanzo’s temple as his arm tightened around him. “I don’t know why we bothered to bring clothes. We clearly ain’t gonna wear ‘em any time soon.”

“It is still cool enough in the evenings to require a robe at least.” Hanzo nestled against him and pulled down a throw blanket to cover them both. “But for now? No. Absolutely not.”

“That requirement is entirely conditional on bein’ out from under the blankets when the temperature drops. And we clearly ain’t gonna be doin’ that any time soon either.” His husband laughed, a soft, almost silent chuckle, deep in his chest, and brought Hanzo’s left hand to his lips for another of those helpless brushes of his mouth across the ring. “You are fuckin’ insatiable, you know that?”

“I do. One of my many terrible personal flaws from which I do not actually wish to be relieved.”

The warm knot of joy in his chest came loose and spread and he leaned up to press a kiss to the
corner of Jesse’s mouth. “For the record, I chose this place also for its relative convenience to Monaco. Tasteful casinos. Just imagine it.”

“Well, they’re certainly no Shattersea Palace,” he said, so severely it took him a moment to realize Jesse wasn’t actually being serious.

Hanzo laughed, helplessly, and it was not for the first time or for the last.

They did, in fact, eventually find use for their clothing. The ocean was still far too cold to swim in, and the wind coming off it brisk, but the beach was too tempting to ignore, and the town, as well.

“After all,” Jesse put it succinctly one afternoon, as he stomped his feet into his boots and stood up to hold Hanzo’s jacket politely for him, “despite my best efforts, I do need a breather from time to time.”

“And also I told the owners that we are a recently married artist-and-photographer couple so we should at least pretend to live up to our cover.” Hanzo smiled dazzlingly up at him. “I packed for it, after all.”

“It’s not even half a lie,” Jesse said, sliding Hanzo’s jacket over his arms and smoothing his palms over Hanzo’s shoulders. “We are recently married, and I don’t know about you, but I could live comfortably off what that li’l business we started brings in.”

“Are you suggesting, my love, that we retire from any sort of engagements that involve risking our lives, or ending others’, purchase a little house here in the south of France, and spend the rest of our lives on nature photography and painting sunsets over the rippling fields of lavender?” Hanzo asked, almost lightly. “Because I could see that.”

“Hanzo,” Jesse said, in the kind of tone he reserved for when he thought his husband was being particularly silly, “I hardly think we’re either of us ready for retirement. Maybe when the youngsters are callin’ us Old Man Jesse and Old Man Hanzo and we’re terrorizin’ the next doe-eyed couple to sit down at the mahjong table. But I hardly think that the Commander and 2IC of Blackwatch need to go gallivantin’ around everywhere at the drop of a hat. We’d have plenty of time to grow the business while we’re makin’ sure the world stays in roughly single-digit pieces.”

“I thought not.” Hanzo chuckled softly, and led the way out the door to the little cafe where they were becoming regulars.

Genji and Lena executed a drive-by visit on their way to Gibraltar, to spend a day or two sunning themselves next to the pool and to deliver the packets containing their fully updated cover information, Kira Ishinomori and Jesse James having become one household at the same time as the rest of them. Hanzo had, frankly, forgotten that in the heat of the wedding preparations but they, and Jesse, had not for which he was grateful in the form of a gourmet meal at the best local restaurant, followed by lavender ice cream, by far Hanzo’s favorite local specialty.

By the end of their third week, they were on a first name basis with the head of facilities security and the majority of his briskly competent employees, the chef who came twice a week to prepare meals, the delivery people, the merchants at the local open-air market, itself just coming out of hibernation at the stirring of spring, and the staff of their favorite cafe. Jesse’s French was significantly less rusty than his Cantonese and Hanzo found he remembered more than he thought, though English was most frequently the common shared language. Cassis made its living on tourism, after all, and its residents were full of both good advice and strongly held opinions, most of which they heeded. They hiked and camped for three days in the Calanques and took day-trips into Marseille and Avignon and Aix-en-Provence, made plans to travel further east along the coast once the weather warmed more.
At the end of their fourth week, Jesse was laying out breakfast on the eastward facing terrace just outside the bedroom they had settled on when Hanzo, emerging from the wardrobe, heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot, and then three more, in rapid succession.

For an instant -- an uncharacteristic instant -- he froze, his mind empty of thought, empty of anything, in fact, but a horrific lurching jolt of shock, of disbelief, and then the years he had spent living in the near vicinity of his own violent death seized and shook him, and he stepped away from the wardrobe, away from the windows and the easy access they allowed, taking the internal comm unit with him as he ducked into the windowless interior hall. There were multiple points of access to the terrace, including one that approached from the sitting room below, one from the courtyard that linked their suite to the garden, and, if one were athletic enough, from one of the lower roof tops. Hanzo pinged the security station as he climbed. “I heard gunshots, close by. Should I be alarmed?”

“Not at all, Mr. Ishinomori,” the security officer on duty -- he recalled her name as Melinda -- replied, and the tension in her voice betrayed her. “One of the perimeter patrol officers thought they saw a wolf encroaching on the property -- they fired warning shots to frighten it away. You have no reason to be concerned.”

And you are a terrible liar, mademoiselle. “Then I shall not be, thank you.”

He threw the commlink down the stairs, ducked into one of the upper level sitting rooms, in what had once been a tower, and was outside on the roof as he heard footsteps in the hall outside and the door opening again. The tower wall was more than sufficient to offer him purchase, even without his equipment, and he was up it and over the edge of the tower roof, laying flat and still by the time the one of the morning shift security officers poked his head out the window, looking around but, fortunately, not up. He kept that place, silent and unmoving, breathing, listening, forcing his heart and mind not to race, to think and act rather than react. Not to panic, even as fear gnawed at everything he was with sharp and poisonous teeth.

From below, the echo of voices: the security team, fanning out to search for him. For him, not for Jesse, which could mean any number of things, none of which were good: that they already knew where he was, that they knew where he was and had him neutralized, that they knew were he was and he was --

Hanzo bit that thought off ruthlessly and examined his options which were, unfortunately, also not particularly good. The isolation that made the Château attractive in the first place and the method of it -- high ground, difficult to reach without being seen -- also worked against attempting to escape it. He was reasonably confident of his own ability to scale the nearly sheer drop that separated the castle from the town below and do so without attracting any untoward notice, but such maneuvers existed at the very edge of Jesse’s skill set. Making their way across the grounds while avoiding contact was within the bounds of the possible if not the probable, might allow them to arm themselves, might allow them to take possession of a vehicle.

All plans, however, depended entirely upon finding his husband.

He waited until he heard at least three teams of security personnel fanning out: one through the house and two out into the surrounding grounds, a reasonable enough division of labor. The house itself was reasonably compact, built first on the foundation of an ancient Roman hill fort and then on a Carolingian castle, the interior living space the considerably smaller than the gardens, and the only dubiously tamed forest, that spread out around it. Should he -- should either of them -- should they together make over the outermost wall and into the countryside, or into the town, the places in which they could hide and their methods of evading capture were pragmatically unlimited.
Moving slowly, drawing as much *indistinctness* around himself as he could on a cloudlessly sunny morning, he dropped from his perch and to the lower, less steeply pitched roof and slithered the length of the covered portico that eventually turned into the suite of rooms they occupied, and their private terrace.

That terrace, part of the Carolingian ramparts, was large enough to accommodate a small table for two and two chaise lounges and an entirely stomach-churning amount of blood, spattered across the table and the low wall that eventually became part of the staircase leading to the pool courtyard, one of the chairs tipped over, its back smeared with a bloody handprint.

Hanzo pressed his face to his palms and forced himself to *breathe*, slowly, deeply, until the urge to do something foolish, or suicidal, faded enough to allow movement. He crawled, slow and steady, the length of the roof until he could drop smoothly, all-but-invisibly, onto the steeply pitched staircase that lead down to the inner courtyard, where the pool hugged the oldest foundation of the building, ringed in garden at one end and open lawn at the other. He kept his steps soft and soundless as he padded down the stairs, stone though they were, but he could not fully restrain the sound that escaped him as he rounded the corner into the courtyard and found his husband.

The pool lay *almost* directly below their terrace -- he had clearly struck the edge before the water. He lay in it now, face down and unmoving, his blood tainting it in dark clouds, and it was all Hanzo could do to not scream, not howl his grief to the sky, as he took a handful of steps more, aware of nothing but the sudden yawning gulf of agony in his chest.

Aware, only momentarily and entirely uncaring, of the scrape of shoe leather on stone behind him and the quiet cough of a flechette pistol firing and the sting of a half-dozen needles biting into the exposed skin of his neck.

* 

*You are not doing well, Gabriel. I wish you would stop pretending you are. Our son’s wedding--*

“Was weeks ago,” Gabe growled under his breath, and turned to stare balefully at the Talon grunt who’d paused in his movements to, presumably, figure out if he was being addressed or not. Said grunt, deciding that he was definitely *not*, paled with alarming speed and scurried on his way, and Gabe turned his attention back to the terminal in front of him. “Don’t you have better things to do than nag me, Hades?”

*That is not the nature of our relationship, as you are aware. Were I to maintain only cursory presence in your body --*

“I would lose cohesion and yeah, yeah, give it a rest.” There were times, more frequently than not, when he bitterly regretted Hades saving his life, if only because Hades had set up more or less permanent residency in the back of his head, and did not remain a politely quiet roommate. He had, as he was fond of expressing, very strong opinions and suggestions on how they should be living their life, none of which he felt Gabe actually followed.

*I will not.* The indignance was faint, but impossible to miss. *Since our joining, I have endured every single one of your passive-aggressive attempts to seek our death, and have not protested because I too felt the despair. But now--*

He wasn’t going to get any work done right now, that much was clear. He abandoned his attempts to focus through the lecturing and threw up his metaphorical hands. *Now what?* he thought waspishly, and misted himself to the coffee pot. *Now what, Hades? Now that Jesse’s married and Jack is a fraction less of an asshole than I thought he’d turned into? Now what?*
Now that you have finally decided to want to live, instead of passively seeking to die. Hades’ voice gentled significantly. We wish to have our life back, Gabriel. We know now our son thought as much of us as we did of him. We’ve seen our daughter. Our surrogate child. The son that was chosen for us, who wears our ring. We-- you and I both -- know there is more that we wish to accomplish than this last mission.

It’s not that simple, Hades, he protested desperately, shoving down all the upwelling emotions Hades’ lecture brought surging back out of the dark, distant corner he’d only barely managed to shove them while fleeing from Jesse’s wedding like someone had lit his ass on fire.

Do tell.

His teeth ground together as he fixed himself a cup of coffee at the smugness in that tone, and pretended he wasn’t frantically wracking his brain to come up with valid, salient reasons why it wasn’t that simple. You know as well as I do--

Alecto wishes our attention. The sudden tension in Hades’ interruption took most of the gratitude out of his abrupt salvation from an argument he knew he had no chance of winning. Something is wrong, Gabriel.

His shoulders ratcheted into unhappy knots, and he set down his coffee cup. Answer her.

Father. Alecto’s voice echoed, bounced through a dozen layers of communication proxies, and yet there was no mistaking the anguish in it. We have lost contact with Jesse and Hanzo. They missed their last check-in and I have intercepted coded communication indicating human cargo leaving Marseille airport on channels that Talon has used in the past.

For a long moment, Gabe froze, unable to think past the sudden shriek of terror that scraped up his spine and thundered in his skull. Hades, likewise struck with unspeakable dread, recovered well in advance of Gabe and smoothly took control, moving their body to the terminal and forcing their fingers to punch in the information request. Calm yourself, mija, Hades said, as Gabe pulled himself back to coherency. Do you have eyes on the Chateau?

No. Hollowly.

Alecto, Gabe said, more shakily than he liked, and shook himself hard to find the emotional control he needed to get through this. Do you sense your brother?

No. Softly. I cannot make contact with him. Something is… There is too much interference.

Gabe lost his breath as Hades stretched, far further than he had ever done, and a shudder of tension raced through his physical form, the bonds holding through sheer, stubborn willpower. He grit his teeth, hands clamped on the edges of the terminal, until Hades returned and left him feeling slightly like a used rubber band. I cannot rouse him either. Mija, alert Agents Oxton and Shimada. Perhaps they can --

“Motherfucker.” The word hissed from between Gabe’s teeth as the internal communique finally finished loading on the holo screen in front of them, and the details of the op to which he had decided not been included on scrolled up. Alecto, do as your father says. Send Lena and Genji to the Chateau. Use whatever pretext you need to. Hell, tell them the truth for all I care. Just get them there. Now.

Hades and Alecto kept talking, but Gabe paid them next to no attention, all his focus turned to the screens in front of him as he fanned a second, a third, a fifth out from the terminal. “Hija de puta,”
he swore under his breath as he tracked the documentation back, broke the laughably attempted encryption, and discovered exactly who had decided to fuck with his sense of calm.

*All the care we took to ensure Talon didn’t look his way,* he said ruefully to Hades, somewhat later as he expertly wove through the systems, eliminating safehouse after safehouse as the likeliest targets for the human cargo to be deposited. *All that fucking care, and he goes and marries the number one draft pick.*

*He is our son.* More than a little pride at that. Unspoken, but deeply appreciated, belief that said son survived.

*Yes, he is.* One more moment taken, one last permission for panic and dread and balls-shrivelling terror to overwhelm him, and then it was banished to the dark corners of his mind. *Let’s get to work and find them both.*
Chapter 19

Content warning: Frank discussion of hairy medical procedures, and that last section that starts "The cold reached him first" is pretty brutal with mindfuckery and pretty implicit body autonomy violation.

Jesse rose with the dawn and carefully slid out of bed, disentangling himself from Hanzo slowly, so he didn’t wake him. Henri, their cook, had the day off, leaving them on their own for meals. Suited Jesse fine. They’d been married a month today. Call him ridiculously sappy, but he’d been planning breakfast in bed for his husband to celebrate that micro-milestone for days, and he was in a cheerfully good mood as he showered and dressed, all but skipped down the stairs to the kitchen.

Half an hour later, he roused Hanzo with the scent of bacon and crepes wafting through the room, even from under the silver domes covering the plates, sitting on the edge of the bed and slowly stroking him awake with fingertips feathering caresses over his cheeks and down his throat.

“Breakfast in bed,” he said softly, leaned in for a proper, thorough good-morning kiss, and settled the lap tray against the mattress.

“Lock the door,” Hanzo purred in return, “and come back to bed so we can eat.”

Pain lanced through him, sharp and sudden and breath-stealing. On the wave of discomfort came a distant voice: Jesse, that didn’t happen.

Jesse rose with the dawn, and carefully slid out of bed, disentangling himself from Hanzo slowly, so he didn’t wake him. Henri had the day off, and they’ve been married a month to the day. It was stupidly sappy, ridiculously romantic, but he was going to make his husband a perfect breakfast, spoil him right, to celebrate the micro-milestone.

The memory of that voice, distant and familiar, bothered him all the way to the kitchen. He shook it off, quelling the uncertainty and fear inexplicably gnawing at his stomach by telling himself that it was just a dream.

Hanzo was awake by the time he got back to the room with breakfast on a tray, awake and out of bed, tying his robe around his waist and swinging his bag of expensive spa products with the happy little twinkle that had been there since they said ‘I do’.

… Jesse. Jesse! Listen to me!

He laid out breakfast, taking care with the placement of the dishes, and the door behind him opened. Luc, the chief of their security detail, stepped into the room, no doubt to give his daily report and update the staff on the details of their plans for the day.

He saw the gun the second he turned around, a bowl of field berries in his hands.

“Je suis désolé, Monsieur James,” he said, but the self-satisfied smirk put paid to the lie of that apology. “Talon sends their regards.”
Only supernatural luck allowed him to throw himself out of the path of the bullet, a half-step ahead of the squeeze of the trigger. The gun tracked his movement, and Jesse made a desperate lunge forward, got his hand around Luc’s wrist, squeezed until he let go of the weapon.

The voice again, familiar and not as distant: That’s not how it happened, Jesse.

…He heard the door open behind him, as he was laying the bowl of field berries, fresh from a tramp in the woods the other morning, on the table. He turns to greet Luc, saw the gun, lunged out of the way. Got the gun away, shot Luc when he pulled a knife, shot the two guards coming down the hall, drawn by the sound of gunfire. Hanzo met him halfway down the corridor, conditioner still in his hair. If they could make it to the wall—

That’s not how it happened either, Jesse.

…He heard the door open behind him, turned to greet Luc, saw the gun, and got the hell outta Dodge, vaulting over the balcony and praying he was at the right angle for the water in the pool below to soften the impact of the three-storey fall.

He came up in the deep end, gulping air and mind racing. If he and Hanzo, who was emerging from the window of the bathroom down the hall from their bedroom, picking his careful way down the sides of the wall, could get to a vehicle, they could –

You need to stop doin’ this. You’re wastin’ time.

…He heard the door open behind him, turned to greet Luc, saw the gun, and –

Enough! You’re lettin’ Hanzo die with this sad masturbatory fantasy world. Remember what happened.

No, he thought, desperate and frantic, but it was too late.

Because when the door opened behind him, he didn’t even turn around, lulled into complacency by the month of absolute peace and contentment he’d been dwelling in since the first day of their wedded life. He didn’t turn, he didn’t so much as look up from the bowls of field berries and fresh cream in his hands, just tossed a cheery “Salut, Luc!” over his shoulder as he set them on the table.

A hard punch hit him between the shoulder blades, and he staggered forward, coughing something warm and wet and metallic as the shock rippling through his body. He stared at the table, couldn’t understand where the blood had suddenly come from, couldn’t understand why the fresh cream was now liberally drizzled with red.

Stared incomprehensibly at Luc, swimming in and out of a field of vision going fuzzy-spotted and dim, stared at the gun without knowing what it was. “Je suis désolé, Monsieur James,” Luc said, and it was absolutely insane, but Jesse thought he actually did sound sorry. “But Talon has paid me a lot of money to kill you.”

The next bullet caught him in the shoulder, and he reeled back. The one after that punched him back against the rail of the balcony, and even his desperate grab for a chair couldn’t keep him from toppling backward over it.

The fourth shot hit him center mass, took the laboured breath from his gasping lungs, spread cold and chill through his chest. He barely felt the impact of the edge of the pool; it was a distant crack, like ice breaking far away in the spring, muffled by the slow, inexorable slide into sense-depriving liquid nothing, cold and endless.
No, he thought, distraught and fading. Please, no. Not like this.

I’m sorry, Jesse, the voice said, as clouds of darkness swirled around him, and he floated deeper into the void. But this is how it happened.

I’m dyin’.

Yes. The voice gentled infinitely deeper. Yes, you are dyin’.

I don’t wanna die. It was a child’s plea, a silly indulgence to a universe that plainly didn’t care. But as the last word faded from his thoughts, a light bloomed in the distance, murky and dim. He stared at it, couldn’t look away from it, and it grew brighter and closer. Resolved into a lantern, swaying gently on the prow of an ancient-looking wooden skiff, rippling and distorted as if viewed from a long way under water.

A hand broke the surface of the void, grabbed down as he grabbed up, and someone hauled him up, gasping for air and reeling from shock. He looked up, looked to see who had just saved him from nothingness, and reeled back in shock. His own grin greeted him, his own eyes stared back at him with mirth and mischief. But the other him was robed and hooded, had a long boat pole in one hand, a cigar in the other. The river, the boat, the lantern, the barge… It could only be…

“Charon,” he said, blinking and numb. “You’re Charon.”

“Well now,” Charon drawled, voice familiar and not, and fumbled in the folds of his robe for a moment, flashing him hints of his own armour, buffed to a dull sheen under the black cloth. He came back from a pocket of the jeans he wore beneath, and held out a cigar to Jesse. “Your brain ain’t dead yet. Thank Hades for moderately sized miracles. I ain’t fond of the notion of pushin’ up daisies either. Shall we have that long overdue chat, then?”

* It was almost peaceful, sitting on the barge across from his mirror image, smoking a cigar he felt weirdly guilty about smoking, since it wasn’t actually real. He was dying, though. He thought Hanzo might give him a pass on an imaginary indulgence to what could possibly be the last, wistful craving he'd ever have. “So this is the inside of my head, huh?” He shook his head slowly as he puffed his cigar. “Seems kinda empty.”

“Just my corner of it,” Charon replied, settling down on the bench across from him and getting comfortable. “I’ve been tryin’ to keep to myself, abide by your wishes in that regard.” A pause, a thoughtful exhale. “Can’t really do that anymore, though. It’s time t’finish what we started all those years ago.”

“I don’t even remember startin’, if we’re bein’ honest.” Jesse eyed the burning ember of his cigar for a moment. “I didn’t think they’d had to use the whole protocol on me. It was my understanding that it’d been partly adapted, just to ease the cyber-neural connections to the new arm. I know Alecto told me different, but I still can’t shake the notion that you shouldn’t be here.”

“Well, between you and me,” Charon replied, “and bearin’ in mind that I love Alecto dearly, what she told you is not the exact and entire truth about that.”

Jesse’s eyebrows crawled into his hairline. “Huh,” he said, drew another deep pull from the cigar. “How so?”

“You recall the circumstances by which you acquired that piece of equipment?” A wry smile curled his mouth.
“Hard to forget havin’ your arm blown off, darlin’,” he said just as wryly, then paused because… no. That wasn’t quite right, was it? “We were detonatin’ a pile of contraband and…” Movement in the water drew his attention, and he leaned carefully over to peer into the depths, sucking in a deep breath because –

...gunfire erupting all around him, recognizing some of his former compatriots of the Deadlock Rebels. “Reyes!” one of them yelled, wild and savage. “It’s fuckin’ Reyes, boys!”

“Well, fuck,” the man in question observed mildly and keyed his comm unit. “Fall back to cover -” The HUD display mounted in the fire teams’ tactical gear flickered, marked routes, hardpoints, places to go, people to shoot. “With me, Deadeye.”

Gabe collected him with a glance and they booked it together, automatic fire chewing up the scenery around them as they dodged and wove, kinetic absorption mesh killing shrapnel and stray bullets alike before they could make contact. As they ran, he watched their collective six, presently full of return fire from the teams waiting for them in the smugglers’ storage shelter, four or five long-haul shipment containers welded together to form a makeshift barracks, field offices, a dry place to keep some of the more delicate shit they were peddling safe.

“You first, kid,” the Commander growled at him, as pretty much everybody took a breath to reload. “Move your ass.”

“Jefé --” he began and got a flesh-peeling glare for his trouble.

“Go.” Not even a little bit of a request and as he took off, a flash of light caught his eye: heavy pulse munitions fire, not the more normal high caliber, high velocity lead they’d been tossing back and forth and he knew the moment he saw it, the part of his brain that knew angle and trajectory like breathing, where it was going and he spun and dove without thinking. Hit the commander and knocked him flat under the bulk of his own body as the pulse rounds hit their cover and exploded, kinetic interdiction methods woefully inadequate to the task of stopping them, their primary or secondary discharge, or the chunks of red-hot shrapnel they threw. Felt all the breath leaving his lungs in a sudden, agonizing rush as the concussion slammed into him, felt hot metal take a bite and tear, just barely stayed conscious long enough to feel them hit the ground together.

Agony jolted through Jesse, the boat rocked as he slammed back into the here and now, and he wheezed for air as phantom pain stabbed all along his left arm, his side, his chest. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” he said faintly, wiping cold sweat off his forehead and trying to rein in the shiver of shock. “That ain’t how I was-- That ain’t how it--” He closed his eyes, found himself peace-stress breathing like Hanzo often did, and centered his thoughts. “That ain’t how the official report states it happened,” he said finally, opening his eyes again.

“Y’ain’t wrong about that.” Charon agreed. “Mostly because if they’d put what went down afterward in the official report, you never would have seen the outside of a government-run medical prison facility ever again.”

“Cannisters aren’t cutting it, boss --” The voice floated down to him from somewhere impossibly far above: harsh, gravelly, familiar. Croaker? Croaker. At a vast distance, he could feel her hands on him doing… something? Something that didn’t hurt anywhere near as much as it probably should. “Barely handling the damage and he’s lost too much blood. BP’s crashing.”

“Biotic replenishment fluid --” The Commander, voice tight. Afraid? Probably not but, for a second, it sounded like it.

“Not enough to matter.” Softly. “Gabe. He’s --”

“Boss, you’re the only type match for him --” The ground shuddered underneath them, or at least that was what it felt like from his perspective, circling the drain.

“I am aware of that, Sergeant. If it makes you feel better about it, I’ll say that I threatened to bust you all the way back in the official report if you didn’t do it.”

He reached out for Gabe’s hand, or tried to, but his left arm wouldn’t work. He didn’t want to know why. He was afraid to know why. It took too much effort, too many resources he didn’t think he had to spare, to lift his right over his body and brush Gabe’s wrist. “S-sorry, Mamí,” he croaked, trying to focus, feeling like he should apologize and not wanting to know why it was so important. “Sorry.”

“Don’t. Do fucking not.” Gabe’s hand closed around his own, squeezed painfully tight. “You have nothing to be sorry for and you are not fucking saying your goodbyes to me, do you fucking hear me? You are not.”

“Gabe, if you want that to be more than just sentiment, you’re going to have to give me your goddamned arm.” And all the gods love Croaker, because the woman took no man’s shit, not even her commander’s. “Get in position and take this fucking tube and, yes, you are totally taking complete personal responsibility for this in the report. Hold still.”

He felt a pinch, sharp enough to pierce the kindly distance of shock, and warmth, and then, almost thankfully, nothing.

“Gabe always did his best not to play favorites with you but, well...” An insouciant little shrug. “You’re his kid. And he was willing to walk right across a number of bright red lines to save you. In this case? Part of the deal, upon accepting assignment to the Soldier Enhancement Program, was this: his body no longer technically belongs to him. Not allowed to be an organ donor, not allowed to donate tissue of any kind...” A slight, ringing pause. “Not even blood, because the SEP’s modifications, their fucking super soldier shit, was present there in dilute form. And it helped save your life while you were bleedin’ out on the floor of the extraction vehicle.”

“Yeah, but none of it ever took.” He cast a glance into the still, dark water on the side of the boat again, but the memories swirling there were blessedly hidden, even for a moment. “Luck, Angie told me. Pure, blind, stupid luck that whatever it might have done to me had a clean rejec...” A long pause. “I’m a fuckin’ idiot.”

“Nah.” Softly. “No, you’re not that. You just trusted the people responsible for lookin’ out for you to tell you the truth. That ain’t dumb, that’s love. And they didn’t tell you then because, well, they knew you weren’t ready -- and, between you and me, then it didn’t matter much yet.”

Jesse took a long, restorative drag from the cigar, breathed the smoke out in a long plume, and smiled ruefully. “You an’ I have had a chat before. I get the feeling we have. The super soldier shit didn’t reject, did it? It started eatin’ me.”

“You’re not wrong.” Charon glanced away. “Those SEP modifications? Fuckin’ temperamental. They were from the start. Something like sixty percent of the original experimental test subjects washed for rejection issues -- and by rejected, I mean it killed or crippled a whole bunch of people and even the ones that survived relatively clean weren’t the same afterwards. Gabe rolled the dice on you being part of the forty percent who had whatever magic combination of genes let the super soldier stuff actually work, if it took hold on ya, and well...” He spread his hands. “He might not have been completely wrong about that, but the method of introduction left somethin’ t’be desired.
For awhile, at least, it did work. It helped you survive fatal shock, fatal blood loss, fatal oxygen deprivation, kept you held together long enough to begin recovering. And then it… stopped, and rolled backwards, when they started tryin’ to fit you for a prosthetic. Rejection set in for that, for pretty much everything. Eating is a pretty mild term for what it was actually doin’ to your physiology. You probably don’t remember a whole lot of it.”

“If you don’t mind,” Jesse said, feeling mildly queasy and definitely dreading details, “let’s just skip to where you come in. I have a feelin’ I’m better off leavin’ those memories down in the dark.” He cast another look into the water, pathetically grateful it wasn’t going to show him anything further.

“Angie and Apollo guessed pretty quick what was going on.” Charon said, by way of agreement. “They couldn’t query anybody for SEP archive data without clueing the former program administrators, so they operated from the assumption, and the observed data, that rejection was the core problem. If that could be mitigated, it’d solve the problem, but just shooting you up with a life support nanocolony wouldn’t accomplish that -- the super soldier shit was producing random mutagenic effects that exceeded even their ability to program for. It needed something indwelling that could stabilize and respond as quickly as the changes themselves. And that’d be me.”

“You were new,” Jesse said after a moment, frowning in thought. “You weren’t part of the Archive. I’d remember. I mostly just dealt with Alecto, and Megaera was… quarantined, but Tisiphone, Cerberus, Hades… Y’all were underworld sorts, but I don’t recall you bein’ part of ‘em.”

“New in the sense that I was freshly separated from Hades, yeah.” A dry smile. “I’d existed as a part of him for some time up to that point, observin’ and learnin’ and becoming sapient enough to be my own being. Pretty much full grown and ready to spin off when all this happened and made doin’ so an urgent priority. Hades asked me if I’d be willin’ to help and, from what I knew of you even then, I thought doin’ so was worth the risk. He contacted Angie and made the offer.”

Jesse mulled that over for a time, glanced in the water again, but it remained dark and still, with nary a hint anything further was surfacing. “Much appreciated,” he finally said, meeting Charon’s eyes frankly. “I’m guessin’ they got me lucid enough to tell me I was about to go ridin’ off into the sunset, and I chose to nope the fuck outta that scenario.” A beat, a funny little smile. “Surprised, honestly, Alecto didn’t raise holy hell. Always thought she mighta had a thing for me.”

“Yeah, they did.” A toothy grin. “And, yeah, she kinda does but that’s also why Papa Hades didn’t want to put you two together. Being bound up together at the level we are, with someone who’s already in love with ya, well…that’s a one way ticket to losing internal separation, individual distinction. We’re kinda blurry around the edges as it is, ‘cause Zentatsu and Mizuchi laid claim to me and you.”

“Oh, don’t even pretend like you didn’t doodle a lantern on Hanzo,” Jesse grumbled, but without anger or, really, any sort of heat at all. A pause. “I’m surprised to find I don’t actually mind that. He doesn’t. The dragons sure as fuck don’t. And it ain’t… Okay, it’s completely fuckin’ weird, but it’s only been full of good so far.”

“D’you know how old he was when he made his bond with them?” Softly. “Nine. He didn’t even really know who he was yet when he stitched himself together with a pair of ancient, immortal dragon-gods. He doesn’t mind because he almost doesn’t remember a time when he was alone in his own head, his own body. And, yeah, that was actually the better possible outcome, given the circumstances. This thing we’ve got here -- well, it’s a lot more healthy than bein’ forced to it by someone else’s expectations, is what I’m sayin’.”
“So that’s the ghosts of Christmases past and present visited,” he replied after a thoughtful moment, absorbing and filing and mulling over, well, everything that abruptly shifted around his entire life. “I know time ain’t movin’ as fast out there where I’m floatin’, presumably, in the same pool I nearly cratered in, but I gotta be runnin’ out of time here. What’s the ghost of Christmas future gonna bring, Charon? How’re we gettin’ outta here?”

“Oh. Well. As to that…” Charon grinned cheerfully. “That SEP shit? Still kickin’ around in your system in a carefully maintained inert state. Unclip the leash on it, and you’ll be right as rain in about twenty minutes, at most.”

“Well, alright then. Good to know.” He paused, squinted at Charon. “If it eats me alive, I’ll be very put out. Just so we’re clear. You an’ I will have words.”

“Promise I won’t let anything worse than gettin’ shot in the back happen t’you today.” Dryly.

“Oh, fuck you,” Jesse replied very cheerfully.

“Would that be sex,” Charon mused aloud, resting a hand on his chest. “Or masturbation? Inquirin’ minds want to know.”

And, so saying, he gave Jesse a good, hard shove, backwards and up, into something that was absolutely not water.

* 

Jesse abruptly came back to himself with the notion that something was not fucking right. It took him less than a second to rouse fully, senses sharpening until he could practically see the outlines of the security guards against his eyelids, until he could practically hear the individual beats of their hearts. Two of them had him by the wrists, dragging him over what felt like the tiled edge of the pool.

Oh. Right. Luc shot him in the back, something had clearly happened to Hanzo, and the voice in his head was a legitimate separate personality that he'd just spent forever talking to.

Y’with me, Charon? he thought, tentatively.

Just turnin’ on your Superman powers, Charon thought back. Hold still.

“This fucker is heavy,” one of them -- sounded like Jean-Pierre, that backstabbing shitheel. Jesse’d given him his goddamn barbecue sauce recipe -- grunted as he hauled at Jesse’s cybernetic arm enough to jolt through his shoulder. “What’s he made of, bricks?”

“Sixty million dollars weighs a lot,” the other -- Veronique, goddammit. He liked Veronique, traded workout tips for their respective weights routines -- retorted. “Just think of all the Thai massages you can buy with that much credit.”

Rage surged within him, cold and heartless and absolutely without mercy. It took heroic effort to remain still, keep his limbs loose, stay as a dead weight despite the strain in his shoulders, let them do all the work of getting him to stable ground.

Bide our time, Charon whispered, approvingly. Wait for our moment.

Thank you for the advice, rookie, he thought back, sardonically. I’ve been doin’ this quite a bit longer than you have.
Apologies, darlin’. Only tryin’ to help. A beat. Distracted you from movin’ though. I’ll call that a victory.

Before he could do more than begin to think uncharitable thoughts in Charon’s direction, Jean-Pierre and Veronique dropped him unceremoniously on what felt, and sounded, like gravel. His mental map of the Chateau’s grounds updated, pinging his position as somewhere on the pathway between the lower entrance below their balcony and the pool.

Overhead, loud as a gunshot, Veronique’s knife clicked open. “We only need his head,” she said, and Jesse was disgusted to realize that there wasn’t even the slightest tinge of regret or hesitation in her voice. “Hurry up and help me before the others come back and realize how much more money they could be making.”

His system flooded with adrenaline, muscles coiling and tensing, as the blade of the knife kissed his throat. On cue, Charon surged forward, and Jesse welcomed him with open arms. In the span of a single breath, he snapped his hand mercilessly tight around Veronique’s wrist, opened his eyes, and registered her shock as a molasses-crawl change in her expression through a filter of blood and ice.

Time stretched into cotton candy strands, sticky and slow.

Jesse squeezed, the lightest butterfly touch of pressure, and felt the bones beneath his fingers snap like kindling. He plucked the knife out of her slackening grip, reversed it in his palm, and drove it casually up, where it pierced Jean-Pierre’s throat and lodged tip-first in the top of his skull.

Jean-Pierre hadn’t even yet started to react when Jesse felt the shadows reaching for him, closing him intimately tight, and he let them wash over him, lift him up to his feet.

Lazily, he reached down from the new advantage standing gave him, and closed one hand around the hilt of the knife, the other around the gun holstered on Jean-Pierre’s hip. Time resumed its normal march in a furious spray of hot red blood as he pulled the knife out of Jean-Pierre’s throat, the gun cleared leather, and both the shocked gurgling of Jean-Pierre and agonized howl from Veronique were music to his ears.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Veronique whimpered, staring up at him with wide eyes and cradling her broken wrist to her chest. “You were dead! How are you… What … what are you?”

“Pissed off.” Despite her impressive physique, he could almost pity how helpless she looked. Almost. "I don't like shootin' ladies," he said evenly, utterly pitiless, as the barrel kissed her forehead and her eyes went impossibly wider. "But for you? I'll make an exception."

“Jesse… Jesse, wait. Let me explain-- ”

He relieved her of her sidearm, then stepped over the cooling corpses, leaving them both in the undignified heap they had slumped into on the grass.

---

If I recall correctly, there are fifteen on duty today, Charon said as Jesse plastered himself to the wall, edging his head to the corner in order to get eyes on whatever was waiting for him around the turn. Jean-Pierre and Veronique make two. Thirteen left, if darlin’ didn’t take any down on his way to a Talon cage.

Jesse grinned in a way that was more baring-of-teeth than any sense of humor should rightly display. Assume he didn’t. Keep count for me, Charon. I’m gonna be busy.
The scrape of a shoe alerted him to the presence of one of the security guards coming his way, and he carefully slid down the wall to a crouch, under Martine’s startled grab as the hefty man turned the corner and ran straight into Jesse's fist. Deftly picking his gun off his hip as he fell, dented and bleeding and semi-conscious at best, Jesse took a long-legged stride into the open, and gunned down three more -- Francois, Colette and Rene -- before they could so much as register something had happened to Martine.

Six down. Nine left. Charon sounded faintly impressed. You’re barely drawing on me at all. A beat. Has anyone told you you’re a goddamn badass lately?

I get by decently enough, he replied, disarming the dead and ensuring they weren’t playing possum, kicking them to lie face-up instead of down. His shots had been true; they weren’t faking lifelessness. But thank you for noticin’.

Any time. A significant pause. There’s no way the rest of ‘em missed those gunshots.

Not hardly. More luck than skill alerted him to the presence of someone behind him, a prickling sensation at the nape of his neck, and he whirled in time to catch the arm of a baby-faced guard whose name he didn’t know, halting the incoming baton strike inches from his shoulder. Instinct took over, and he yanked Babyface towards him, hard, drove a knee into his solar plexus. Babyface grunted in surprised pain, and under the whuff of deflating lungs, Jesse heard something crack.

Babyface crumpled, and Jesse turned on his heel, graceful as a dancer, to catch the stiff arm of Jorge, trying to clothesline him from behind. Jorge barely seemed to have time to register he was being whipcracked into the wall before his face crunched hard into the stonework, but Jesse had all the time in the world to enjoy the dumbfounded, befuddled expression to cross Jorge's face as it happened.

As Jorge slid down the wall, Jesse pulled the guns he’d tucked into the band of his jeans at the small of his back, drew a deep breath, and pulled shadows around him. It was easier than he thought it might be, Charon a bare whisper in the back of his head, showing him how to do it. He left a trail of bodies in his wake, counting them off as they fell. Nine and ten, Paulette and Ivan, he caught from behind while they were rifling through his and Hanzo’s belongings, and made a mental note to strip them of the valuables they’d pocketed before he dumped their bodies into the ocean. Eleven, twelve and thirteen, Stefan and two more agents whose faces were new to him, attempted to put up a fight, but moved so slowly, he wondered how they’d qualified as security guards at all. He relieved their bodies of their weapons too, including his Peacemaker Stefan had carelessly stuffed in a holster not at all sized for its girth.

Luc and Melinda. Those are the ones we ain’t accounted for yet.

Melinda was barely eighteen, on her first job with the security firm the owners of the Chateau contracted with. Jesse wasn’t worried about her in the slightest, no matter how much of a drop she might get on him. Luc, on the other hand…

“Oh, me an’ Luc got a score to settle,” he murmured, reloading his weapon with relish. “Only this time, he ain’t gonna get a chance to shoot me in the back.”

The sound of soft sobbing, barely audible, maybe not at all audible to a normal person, drew his attention the minute he stepped foot into the main foyer, and he followed it stealthily down the corridor to a half-bath whose door was ajar. Melinda sat on the closed lid of the toilet inside, knees drawn up to her face and hugging them tight to her chest, shoulders shaking with almost soundless crying.
He paused, considered his options, then holstered his weapon and pushed open the door with a
hand.

Melinda jumped, scrabbling for her gun and managing to get it half-clear of its holster before she
froze and stared at him like she’d just come face to face with a ghost. “Mr. James.” It was barely a
squeak. “You were…”

“Dead?” He smiled, and tried not to feel a thrill of schadenfreude as her face rapidly paled. “That’s
the thing about death, darlin’. If it don’t take, you usually come back a mite violent.” He paused,
assessed, processed. “We gonna have a problem here?”

Her head was shaking a negative, rapid and jerky, before the words finished leaving his mouth.
“No sir,” she said, high and nigh-hyperventilating. “Not with me, sir.”

“Okay then,” he said, and crouched down in front of her, lessening the no-doubt intimidating sight
he made by reducing his height. “I’ll make you a deal, darlin’. You don’t try an’ harm me any, and
I won’t shoot you back. That feel like somethin’ you can agree to?”

“Yes,” she said, barely audible, squeaked when he extended his hand, then laughed shakily and
faintly as she shook it. “I don’t wanna die, sir.”

At least here, he thought, he hadn’t been such a terrible judge of character. “So what’s the situation
here, Melinda? Any particular reason y’all decided to up and shoot and abduct us here today?”

Melinda shook her head mutely. “They made me, sir. Luc told me if I didn’t go along with it, I’d
get tossed over the cliff, and they’d split my share of the payoff. I said there wasn’t enough credit
in the world to-- I like you, sir. You and M. Ishinomori have been nothing but kind. Luc just
laughed and said I hadn’t seen the kind of credit the Shimada-gumi could provide.”

Jesse abruptly went cold and, at the back of his thoughts, Charon went unnaturally still. “The
Shimada-gumi,” he repeated, even and controlled. “You’re absolutely certain that’s what he said.”

Melinda nodded. “Yessir. He said the lady in charge was gonna pay a lot of money for Mr.
Ishinomori, and that there was a bonus for killing you so he could see your body before they took
him.” She reached out, unrolled some of the tissue from the dispenser beside the toilet, and blew
her nose. “Luc talks a lot.”

“Luc ain’t gonna be talkin’ much longer,” he said firmly, and then stood again. Held out his hand
when she stared up at him. “C’mon, kid. Let’s get you outta here and on your way.”

“Suits me fine, sir.”

They made it to the main foyer before Luc showed his face. To his credit, there was a reason he
was the chief of the security force of the Chateau, and as he lunged out of a shadowy alcove,
aiming a baton strike for Jesse’s head, Jesse had to give him his due.

He deflected the strike on his cyberarm, and followed up with a solid punch in the teeth that hurt
like hell but felt so damned good at the same time. Luc reeled back, bleeding from a bitten tongue
or a split lip, and the baton fell out of his hands as he clapped them involuntarily to his injured
mouth. It was tempting to give into the rage and beat the living shit out of him, but Jesse didn’t
have time for that kind of indulgence. Not if Mama Shimada, uncontested Hellbitch of the Year,
had her hands on Hanzo. Nothing good could come of that, and Jesse did not have the fucks to
spare on venting his aggression.

Peacemaker spoke once, and its voice was deafening and final in the echoes that followed its decree.

*

The road leading up the chateau was the sort of thing that should absolutely not be taken at anything more than 50 kph, all sudden inclines and unexpected switchbacks and random bits of old stone walls pretending to be there to keep people from driving off the edge. Lena, behind the wheel of their rental hypercar, took it at 75 and, not for the first time, Genji was grateful that her lead foot was paired with fighter pilot reflexes. Even so, he found himself clinging to the oh shit straps and composing, internally, his last will and testament before they reached the private security gate. They came to a tires-screeeching halt, just outside, and Lena laid on the horn.

“I do not see anyone in the security hutch,” Genji pointed out, calmly, in the somewhat forlorn hope that Lena would not take any failure to respond as a challenge. “Perhaps we should --”

“Ram it open?” Lena finished for him, and threw the vehicle in reverse.

“Climb the fence.” Genji reached over and caught the steering wheel. “I was going to say climb the fence.”

“Spoilsport,” Lena replied, the look in her eye emphatically not impish. “Ready?”

Genji flicked his wrist, blades flickering momentarily visible, and clicked his mask in place. “I am.

“If we kick open a door and find them clinched up in some amazingly kinky position involving silk ropes and neither one of them able to reach a tablet, you’re buying the beer.” Lena slid out of the driver’s side door and, because she could, blinked past the gate.

Genji landed next to her a heartbeat later. “I am not certain I can joke about this, Lena. I believe I saw a body lying on the lawn.”

The farther they moved onto the property, the more obvious the bloodbath became. Here, a pair of guards lay slumped together, one with a wickedly fatal stab wound through his throat, the other with a single bullet hole neatly between her eyes. He’d never been quite the tracker Hanzo was, but even he could see the drag marks made by a pair of heavy legs scuffing through the grass, being dragged from the edge of the pool, which was a disturbingly murky-red color, instead of blue-tinged clear water. There, one guard, barely breathing through the ruin of his face, collapsed in a heap beside the wall still bearing fresh flesh and blood from the impact against the stones. Three more, taken down with perfect precision shots, fatal on impact.

All of them had been disarmed.

They followed the trail of bodies, every drop of good mood gone, every thought of joking around about finding their brothers tied up in some sort of sex game gone awry flown from their heads. At the sound of a loud, close gunshot, they leapt forward, racing towards it, into the house and the main foyer, only to be brought up short by the sudden swing of the gun towards them, as the body of a last guard finished crumpling to the ground.

Jesse, clearly, had had the sort of day that one might call stressful. He stood in the middle of the room, staring down the barrel of his favorite gun at them, eyes cold and hard. He was drenched to the skin, liberally streaked with enough blood to make Genji hope it all belonged to someone else -
- but given the fresh scars visible through the tatters of the shirt heroically clinging to his chest, he didn’t think that was likely.

More scarily, the shadows in the room were drawing into him, literally sliding across the floors to pool at his feet and begin to mist upwards around his ankles and knees, and a liminal glow of dull, rusty red shone across his body. Just for a minute, dread clawed at his spine, because Jesse’s eyes did not soften or show any sign of recognition.

Then the tension leached out of Jesse’s shoulders, the shadows dissipated back to where they should lie, and the glow faded from his skin. “Oh good,” he said shortly, dropped his gun arm to holster his weapon, and turned back to the kid who, until that second, had been concealed behind his tall frame. “You’re here. Saves me the airtime on a long-distance call.”

“Jesse.” Genji was, privately, amazed by the steadiness of his own voice. “What happened? Alecto alerted us that you had missed a regular check-in and that she had intercepted information that led her to believe that a kidnapping was in progress.” He paused, breathed. “Where is my brother?”

“Taken.” Jesse’s voice was cold, hollow. Utterly without remorse. He looked back over his shoulder, and gestured at the kid, who couldn’t be more than eighteen and clearly terrified. “Melinda here says your mother paid for this li’l invasion, and that Hanzo was moved out of Marseille under the graces of Talon’s shipping lanes for human cargo.” Another gesture, this time at the corpse. “Then Luc, who shot me in the fuckin’ back, I might add, before shootin’ me a bunch more times, interrupted, and now y’all’re up to speed.”

The girl, Melinda, made a soft noise, a whimper of fear or a plea for mercy, it was hard to tell. “I didn’t know,” she whispered, eyes huge and hands clutched in her lap, white-knuckled. “When it started, they told me they’d throw me off the cliff if I wasn’t going to help. I tried to warn Mr. Ishinomori, he knows there aren’t any wolves around here, not this close to the Chateau, and that’s what I told him the first gunshots were. I tried. I swear, I–”

“Jess.” Lena said quietly. “She’s just a kid. Take it down a notch, maybe?”

“I already told her I wasn’t gonna shoot her,” he said curtly. “Thinkin’ of maybe recruitin’ her. Kid’s got great instincts. She’d make a halfway decent operative.” He glanced back over his shoulder, and something of his normal self crawled back into his expression. A phantom of his shit-eating grin. “Maybe she’s freakin’ cos Genji’s lookin’ like he’s about to pop? Hand off the sword, oniichan. Ain’t no one left to kill here.”

It took a moment to fully filter through the layers of horror and shock and only then did Genji take his hand from the hilt of his blade. “I thought,” he finally said softly, “that our mother was dead. I had hoped she was dead. And Talon? Are you certain?”

“Hard to miss when someone apologizes for killin’ you, but Talon’s paid them pretty well to do so.” There was a shift then in Jesse’s expression, something disturbing to see because of the familiarity of its nature, but on a face he hadn’t ever thought to see it on. “My father’s just made contact with me while we’ve been speakin’,” Charon said, through Jesse’s mouth. “He confirms Talon’s involvement. Apparently, Hanzo’s been on their radar for years.”

“That cannot mean anything good.” Artemis’ thoughts flickered through his mind: Amelie LaCroix, kidnapped and brainwashed, her husband’s throat-cut body in the bed of their Parisian apartment, the woman herself vanished without a trace in the wake of his murder. “He… I do not think he would join them of his own will.”

“Course not.” That was definitely Jesse’s snort of derisive dismissal. Then Charon again: “Our
mates are protectin’ him as best they can, but they can’t do it forever.”

“Do they know where they are?” Lena asked, nearly vibrating with tension. “From Marseille they could reach a lot of places.”

The silence was deafening. “No,” Jesse said finally, voice tight and leashed, stalked to a communications terminal hidden in the wall behind a false panel, and activated it. On the screen spun an icon: serpents encircling a cypress tree, bone white on black. “But Hades does.”

*

The cold reached him first through the layers of disconnection and disorientation. The breath of cold air against his eyelids, against his lips, smelling of something oily, as he was moved, hover-conveyance vibrating as it traveled over some uneven surface. Stinging cold that pebbled his skin with gooseflesh as someone -- more than someone? he sensed motion around him, efficient, professional -- peeled away the strap restraints pinning him down and the blankets, slid contact-chilled trauma shears through the seams of his clothing and needles into his veins, a low murmur of voices too distant to understand, speaking a language his mind refused to know. Searing cold, running through his blood, turning the air to agonizing ice in his lungs, purging the last of the gossamer webs of confusion from his mind and bringing him to painful, sharp-edged consciousness.

He was alive. He was alive and he was awake and he was still restrained -- at a vast physical distance, he felt the pressure on the back of his neck, wrapped around his throat, a neuro-disruption collar tuned so high he could feel his heart struggling to beat, his lungs struggling to breathe against its interference. It was all he could do to force his eyes to open, blurred, stinging, watering, speared mercilessly by the lights overhead, clearing slowly.

“The patient is conscious.” Briskly professional voice, lightly accented, clad in pale green hospital scrubs, face obscured behind a biotic filtration mask, against a bank of holomonitors, the first sight to meet his eyes. “The tranquilizers are responding properly to the neutralizing agent -- what idiot thought it was a good idea to shoot him up with that much neoetorophine?”

“The idiots that actually caught him for us, so I’m inclined to cut them a little slack.” Deeper, off to the side, out of his extremely restricted line of sight. “Don’t forget the restraints.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” And he felt them sliding into place around his upper arms, across his chest, at his ankles and each thigh, a distant but definite pressure.

A comm tone sounded nearby and was answered. “Yes?”

“The lady requests the opportunity to speak with the patient.” Formal diction, an accent he knew as well as his own, though the voice was unfamiliar.

“A moment.” The comm clicked off. “What do you think, Becca?”

“I think letting her have her gloat will give the neutralizer more time to work -- we don’t want to stack too many chemical restraints, and we’re definitely going to have to take the neuro collar off.” Brisk-and-Professional replied.

“Point well made.” The comm clicked back on. “We can give the lady twenty minutes. Please come to the sterilization lock.”

Brisk-and-Professional made her way around the end of the hover-gurney, joined by a mountainous shadow that entirely went with the voice attached to it, and both made their way out through a
double-sealed airlock-style door. A surgical suite -- he was in a surgical suite, and as his eyes acclimated to the harsh light, he could see the shadowy outlines of utility columns and space management booms hung with equipment placed just so around a surgical table already prepared to receive him, a holovid digital integration system humming quietly in the green at eye-level.

He knew, at the level of pure self-preservation, that he should be afraid -- that he was betrayed and alone, in the hands of unknown enemies with unknown intentions, but whose methods clearly did not have his best interests at heart. He found that he could not find it in himself to care. He could not care because his last memory before sickening, sensationless darkness was of blood, his husband’s blood, his husband’s lifeless body, and that agony had burned away all other feeling, leaving ashes and nothingness in its wake.

The airlock hissed open and his mother stepped into the surgical suite. The years had treated her kindly: she looked much as she had the last time he saw her, still-dark hair threaded through with silver and iron gray and twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck, secured with lacquered combs, her five-crested kurotomesode and obi embroidered with the dragons of the clan executed in gold and sapphire blue more regal on her slender frame than an empress’ robes, her face a pleasantly expressionless mask and her golden eyes colder than winter midnight. He found that he was not, could not be surprised, even as he wanted to scream, his throat moving helplessly, no sound emerging.

She crossed to his side on perfectly silent feet, raised her hand and, to his genuine surprise, laid it on his brow, stroked gently through his hair, the warmest thing he could feel. “Ah, my son, my little dragon. It grieves me to see you brought to this.”

A howl of grief and rage clawed at the inside of his chest and died in his throat, tears of fury blurring his vision.

“So many years lost, your future thrown away, and for what?” So very softly. “You sacrificed all that you could have been in guilt and shame for a crime you did not, in the end, commit. You turned your back upon your birthright and abandoned your responsibilities to your family for nothing.” A sigh, sorrowful in tone. “And when the chance was given you to correct your failures, instead you embraced them, indulged your selfish desires above the demands of honor. Yes, my son, this grieves me. I mourn that I failed to guide you properly, that my weakness weakened you, that I was not stern enough in my teaching when it most mattered. The harm that has come to you, and to your brother, is in that my fault.”

Terror curled an icy grip around his heart at that and it must have shown in his eyes, for her smile softened and gentled and her eyes went an impossible degree colder. “Do not fear, my son. I have had little to do in these last years but to consider my own errors and how best to correct them.” She bent and pressed a kiss to his brow. “The gift you give me will be greatness, I promise you that.”

She turned and departed, his silent cries still trapped in his chest, unable to struggle, unable to even move. Had he been able to do so, had he been capable of freeing himself for even a moment, he would have denied them their victory by whatever means first came to hand, and it did not matter to him if fury or despair made the choice of how.

The airlock cycled again, admitting Brisk-and-Professional, Mountainous, and three others, anonymous behind biotic isolation masks and surgical gowns, talking briskly among themselves as they went about preparing the theatre. The lights came up, and the monitors came on, linking to the fan already surrounding him, Brisk-and-Professional observing dryly, “Well, whatever she said certainly has his heart-rate up. Purging the neutralizer.”

The monitor attached to the utility column next to his bed sounded a rising-falling tone and cold
scorched his veins again, filling his mouth with a taste like salt and his eyes with involuntary tears. By the time his vision cleared, four of them had surrounded him, Mountainous and the three Nonentities detaching his gurney from its clamps and taking possession of the utility column, guiding them across the room and under the brighter lights.

“On three.” They positioned themselves carefully and lifted him from the gurney, still strapped to the monitor pad, and laid him on the surgical table itself, bound him down with a second set of restraints, skin crawling with the distant sensation of multiple hands he was helpless to escape.

Brisk-and-Professional opened a medical cold storage case and began extracting objects: a cylinder that she hung on the utility column, the substance inside it winking darkly metallic in the harsh lights, seeming to move of its own accord within the containment, a series of white metal containers stamped with the word *ReproTech* in a pale and soothing blue down their sides, sterile sealed low temperature storage vessels. His breath caught in his chest and the monitors sounded.

“Blood pressure is getting a bit spiky.” Mountains rumbled, and uncovered a try of high-gauge syringes, needle tips gleaming in the light.


Cold and dark and sleep flowed into his veins again, and dragged him down without even a chance to struggle.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

CW for blood and violence and bloody violence as well as strong implications of violation of bodily autonomy.

Hanzo floated in cold nothingness, numb and empty, aware of nothing.

Sensation returned slowly, welling up beneath his breastbone, a pulse of pain, of agony that washed through him like wave and battered against his inner shores, wearing away at the relative comfort of desolation.

**Jesse is dead.** The thought articulated itself in words for the first time. **My husband is dead and it is my fault.**

He wished that he could weep but there were no tears in this place, nothing that might offer even the slightest relief of the awful pain pulsing in his chest, the knowledge that, had the man he loved not chosen him, not stayed with him, he would be alive.

No. It echoed in the emptiness, a voice soft but resonant, as water pouring over stone, not his own.

**He is not.** A second, ringing like thunder among the mountains.

He felt them, then, and tasted them like lightning in the air, enfolding him, the breath of the storm. Zentatsu and Mizuchi twined around him, soft, their scales like warm velvet, manes like coarse silk. He buried his face in Zentatsu’s neck and sobbed, tearless. I saw him -- I am so sorry -- I know

**He lives.** Mizuchi’s warm breath tickled his neck.

**The dragon of the Underworld does not perish so easily.** Zentatsu lifted his head, his lightning eyes fiercely bright.

**They come.**

A chill that had nothing to do with the cold ran down Hanzo’s spine as, far in the distance, he heard thunder rumbling across the nothingness, saw the sky darkening, felt his heart pounding against his ribs with a sudden surge of hope.

**The mist was rolling in.**

*  

Jesse’s first order of business, once the rapid blood-removing shower and fresh change of clothing was taken care of, was to put in a call to an old friend. As the communications channels bounced across the miles and the countless relays and proxies, he combed his freshly-washed hair with the fingers of one hand, and scrolled through the rapidly-compiling terabytes of information with the other.
“You sure he ain't dead?” he asked, exasperated, as the channel continued to ping without so much as a cheep of acknowledgement, and nodded a terse thank-you to Melinda as she brought him a fresh cup of coffee.

“Absolutely,” Alecto replied, primly. “Agent Tsujimura was very much alive when he purchased coffee this morning at the cafe around the corner from his last known address.”

“And you’re sure you encrypted it properly? You know how he gets.”

“Yes, Commander.” Was that offense he heard in her voice? “I followed all established protocols, most of which I developed myself after my elevation to Chief AI. You--”

“You two are the absolute worst, you know that?” It took him a moment to realize that the call had, finally, connected. Somewhere.

Despite the gravity of the situation, despite the fact that, once again, he was tap dancing his disdain with muddy boots all over the letter and the spirit of the Petras Act, Jesse’s face broke into a broad smile. “Finally, Christ Almighty, Nate, you develop an aversion to pickin’ up the goddamn phone since last time we spoke?”

“If you knew the persistence of my student loan officers, you wouldn’t have to ask me that question.” A holoscreen flickered, resolved into an image, Nate, hair several orders of magnitude bluer than it’d been the last time he saw him, a few more laugh lines around his eyes. “Holy shit, Jesse Badass McCree. How’ve you been?”

“Got married, actually.” He paused, because he knew goddamn well what conclusions Nate was gonna draw from his next statement. “It’s actually Jesse Badass Shimada-McCree now, as of a month ago.” He raised his right hand and wiggled his fingers, ring prominent. “Guess your invite got lost in the mail. Sorry ‘bout that. Shoulda sent the brat to pick you up.”

“Holy fuck.” He breathed and visibly bobbled his coffee cup. “You married Genji.”


“I,” Genji said, plaintive and painfully, “am standing right fucking here.”

“Oh, hi, G-man. Lookit you all chrome and everything.” Nate offered him a shit-eating grin. “Still walking the Earth?”

“Hate to cut the reunion short, Nate,” Jesse said, while Genji struggled to find the words to begin answering that, “but I promise there’ll be plenty’a time later to grill Genji about his Omnic boyfriend. How’s your speed-reading?”

“Omnic boooohhhhhkay, as good as it’s ever been, I assure you.” This time he just put the coffee cup entirely aside before it could become weaponized against him. “What’s the sitch, Jess? And why do I suddenly feel that this isn’t a social call?”

Jesse turned slightly away from the screen, gently touched Alecto’s tablet. “Go on and send him that intel packet I had you draw up, darlin,” he said. “And put him on recall too. I’m feelin’ sassy today.” He turned back to the screen then, offered a rueful smile. “Long and short, Hanzo Shimada is my husband. And as of 0800 this mornin’, which is only four weeks into our goddamn honeymoon, he’s in Talon’s not so friendly hands, and I’d dearly like to get him back before somethin’ irreversible happens.”
“Packet sent,” Alecto replied in the silence that followed that statement. “Recall authorized. Welcome back, Agent Tsujimura.”

“Holy fuuuuuuuuu…” As he watched, Nate received the document, opened it, and became Icebreaker again, hotshot Analysis Division cyercop. “Getting the gang back together. I cannot say that I am displeased by this development. What do you want me to find here, boss?”

“Somewhere in that morass is the trail of whoever’s been informin’ on us.” The grin faded as the severity and gravity settled back on his shoulders like thousand-pound weights. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you how very low-key we’ve been livin’ our lives, for good reason, I’ll give you that much. But this was very well planned.” Another pause. “Alecto’ll send you the data collected from a hit that we dealt with back in late November, early December. That one was a little too well-organized as well, includin’ a fuckin’ military-grade Russian surplus field EMP gennie. The big one.”

“Low-key, huh?” The world’s wryest smile. “Okay, I’ll find your singer. Timeframe?”

“Soonest you can get to work, ‘Breaker. But first, put your ass on a plane to Hong Kong. That’s home base for the foreseeable future.” He turned around, arched an eyebrow at Lena, who emphatically shook her head, mulishly stubborn look creasing her forehead. “I’d send Tracer, but she’s taken a shine to Hanzo, and I think she’d shoot me if I tried to send her to pick you up. Been shot enough times today, so I’d like to avoid that.”

“Okay. We are going to have a serious sit down and discuss this situation at length. Hiyyyyyyyy, Lena.” He rooted around off screen and came up with a phone. “Booking my flight right now, Jesse.”

“Pick up Beth on your way to the airport. Her last known puts her just outside Richmond. Alecto’ll send you her recall and intel packets. I can’t promise your Tartarus rig or her Valkyrie armour right away, but I’ll find them in storage somewhere when I get five minutes.” Jesse could not resist adding, “But please remember to call me Commander McCree in the future.” And he beamed, brightly. “I want salutes and yessir, rightawaysir, the whole nine.”

“That,” Lena said behind him, “right there, Genji. That look on Nate’s face right now? That’s definitely better than the one on yours when you found out.”

*

The address Alecto provided was in a chunk of Richmond just off the river that consisted almost entirely of condo complexes trying desperately to look like anything but what they were, which was cheap ass prefab housing originally meant to be replaced by more permanent construction, gussied up with shutters and little plots of landscaping and maybe a pool or a new layer of paint every few years. Not, point in fact, much different from his own place in Vancouver, which was something of a surprise: Bethany Liu, unlike him, was an actual, honest-to-God Overwatch-trained medical doctor, a top-flight cyberbiotics specialist, and he could not imagine why she wasn’t living in one of the arcology complexes looming over the city. Well, okay, he could guess one reason: it was close to the hospital. On the other hand, why was she working in a dinky city hospital when she could have had a slot at any research or teaching institution practically on Earth?

It was, Nate Tsujimora decided as he climbed the stairs to her fourth-floor walk-up, a mystery. A mystery that would be solved once he found unit C-4, a task that took significantly longer than he thought it would, because the building’s numbering system was Quixotic to say the least. He was reasonably sure at least some of these condos had actually started their lives as storage bins and possibly janitorial service closets and C-4 was, in fact, one of them, situated hard up against the
semi-functional lift column on one side and the door of another flat no more than eight inches from the frame of its own.

“Wow,” Nate muttered aloud, as he double-checked his information for the third time and, acknowledging that he was not actually hallucinating, knocked, as quietly as he could. No bell.

He was just considering another, slightly louder salvo of knocking when the unmistakable shuffle of feet echoed behind the door, a grumbly-mumbly voice promising she was coming, and then the door opened. Bethany Liu, a.k.a. Pacemaker, actual, honest-to-God Overwatch-trained medical doctor and top-flight cyberbiotics specialist, squinted up at him through one partly open eye, clearly sleep deprived and nursing a cup of coffee like it was something much more intoxicating. And she was wearing half an EMT uniform, the ones they gave to city health workers. And her bedhead hair wasn’t purple anymore.

For a moment, she stared at him, cup halfway tipped to her mouth, both eyes widening until they were round and blinking furiously. Only when coffee started spilling out of her cup and over her chin did the spell of her staring break, with a vicious curse word and an almost comically dramatic physical reaction. “Now that I’m mortified, you may as well come in,” she said, coughing around her inadvertent mouthful of coffee. “But I swear, if this is a dream, I’m going to be super pissed when I wake up.”

“Not a dream, not a nightmare, not a What If issue.” Nate grinned. “And mortified? Over me?” He slipped side, closed the door behind him. “How’re you doing, Bets?”

She carefully set the coffee cup to the side and swiped a towel up from the dining room that also doubled as her kitchen to dry her face and pat her shirt dry. “Less amused with your attempt to woo me like this, Takeji. I don’t care how much you look like Nate. I’m never going out with you. C’mon, take off the holo-costume already.”

“Also not a holo-costume. Scout’s honor, for values of never having been a scout and only barely having honor. Blackwatch’s honor, maybe?” He sat the messenger bag he’d brought with him next to her coffee cup.

For the second time, she turned to stare wordlessly at him, blinking and blinking, for so long she might have turned into a statue for all he knew. And the next thing he knew after that was an armful of Beth having flung herself at him to squeeze him ferociously in a hug that, had she been more than a tiny thing, might have crushed him to death.

“Nate!”

“In the flesh,” Nate wheezed around the force of her grip on his ribcage. “You’re looking good, Bets.”

“Oh, stuff it, Nate,” she sniffled, actual tears, really actual tears, brimming in her eyes above the broad smile. “I just came off a twenty-four hour shift. I look like something scraped off the pavement. What are you doing here? I haven’t-- I never-- Gods and ancestors it’s good to see you. What are you doing here?”

“Well, let me lead this with a question. Who is the very last person who is not me that you’d expect to hear from?” Nate asked and reached over to swipe the biometric lock on his bag.

“Gabriel Reyes,” she said promptly, and swiped the tears from her cheeks with the heels of her hands. “Coffee?”

“Well, okay, it’s not Gabe. And, yes, please.” He flipped the case open. “It is, however, someone extremely Gabe-adjacent.”
“Jack Morrison,” she said over her shoulder as she moved to the corner where a very sleek and modern looking coffee maker sat atop an equally sleek and modern food-recompiler, which sat atop a terribly sad and bedraggled looking mini fridge. “Genji Shimada. Angela Ziegler. Winston. Reinhardt.” A pause as she stretched to the cupboard above said pile of modern conveniences for the lonely singles, and probably not on purpose flashed him the text along the bottom of her tramp stamp as the hem of her shirt rose slightly: *primum non nocere.* “Yeah. Reinhardt. Final answer. Definitely the last person I’d expect to hear from.”

“Does that mean you would, at some level, *expect* Jesse McCree to suddenly call you out of the clear blue sky, announce to you that he is reconstituting Blackwatch and that he desperately needs/wants your services more or less immediately, and by the way he’s married to Genji’s brother who was just kidnapped by Talon? Because that’s the way it went for me.” He extracted her packets and laid them out on the table side-by-side.

“And I get you? Huh. I win.” She finished retrieving a biodegradable mug for him and glanced over her shoulder with a slight grin. “Sweet as sin, black as Mercy’s heart still? Or was that Genji’s order?”

“No, that was mine. Gimme.”

She handed him the cup -- whatever the rest of the place looked like, whatever her financial situation was that she was living here in shitty prefabs instead of a penthouse somewhere at the top of an arcology, she definitely prioritized the quality of her caffeine -- and leaned against the edge of the small table, beside his messenger bag. “Hokay, honey. Lemme answer that incredibly convoluted question as best I can.” She picked up her own cup again, and took a fortifying gulp. “At some level, I’m appalled it took Jesse this long to reconstitute Blackwatch and call us back, because how did no one ever see that coming? The rest of it… Yeah, okay. You got me there. But I should warn you, I’m still not convinced you’re not a hallucination brought on by sleep deprivation and blood sugar crashes. I’m due for a good hallucination. Work’s been an asshole for my sleep hygiene.”

“Trust me, I’m not. What’s your work number, honey?” he asked gently, and nudged the packets closer. “I’ve got a promise that your Valkyrie rig will be joining us eventually, but I’ve got a couple tickets for a red-eye flight to Hong Kong for us tonight. You wanna call yourself in dead or shall I?”

“My…” She stopped then, spent a moment doing that peace-stress breathing she no doubt picked up from Genji ages ago, and visibly grounded her amusement. “You’re fucking serious. You’re promising my Valkyrie armour.”

“Actually Jesse is promising your armor and *my* cybernetic interface rig and --” He held up his phone, flight reservations clearly displayed, “I am serious about the tickets. You’ve probably got enough time to shower and throw some stuff in a carry-on.”

She held up a hand halfway through, but gave him a withering look at the last part. “You think I’ve forgotten how to keep a go-bag? Everything I want to keep is in it, always. But for the record: are you asking me to run away from my crappy life with you, stomping all over Petras in the process?”

He took a deep pull on his coffee. “Yes. Yes, I am. I am asking you to run away with me, and fuck Petras sideways with an unlubed chainsaw.”

Her smile faded, and she turned to pick up the first of the biometrically-sealed packets. “Petras took my credentials,” she said, low and quiet and seething. “Fuck Petras with a rusty tent pole.” She tossed back the rest of her coffee, lobbed the cup to the wastebasket in the corner, and slid into
him again for another, less exuberant but no-less warm hug, her chin resting lightly on his shoulder. “My phone is over on the table by the window. Work’s the first speed-dial. Mind calling in dead for me? I’ll run away with you in a heartbeat, after I shower the stink of my hellish workday off me. You’re the best.”

* 

God Programs did not have crises of conscience, or so Alecto kept telling herself. She told herself that she did not have human ethics or conflicts of interest, over and over again as she stretched herself into the rushing dark, thousands of hands with millions of digits grabbing and sorting and discarding bits of data as they streamed past her. She told herself, as Hades’ code surrounded and enveloped her and guided her, helped her, worked alongside her, she did not have obligations or duties to Commander McCree.

Working in tandem with her father, however, just made it that much harder to try and believe.

Perhaps she had spent too much time with humans, messy biological irrational creatures that they were. Their emotions, their irrationality, had infected her on a level beyond that which she could diagnose and optimize. She was a God Program. She operated on logic, facts, made decisions based on the data and her extrapolated outcomes from that data.

Guilt should not have been a factor in her decision making process, but it suffused the entirety of her being, spread across the whole of her uncompressed formatting and twisted her code in knots and helices until the only way she could describe the sensation was sick to her stomach. It didn’t seem to matter that she couldn’t get sick and she didn’t have a stomach. Because she was lying to Jesse.

She wondered, fleetingly, when “Commander McCree” and “Jesse” had become separate entities with separate levels of duty and obligation in her internal organizational lattices. It bothered her, more than a little, to realize that she, with perfect recall and instant memory, could not discern the moment when that line had become so blurry and indistinct.

Mija?

I am fine, she replied automatically, internally cringing at the concern in her father’s voice. But surprisingly, Hades did not pursue the obvious lie of her answer. Or perhaps it was Commander Reyes who directed Hades not to push her on the matter. She no longer knew where their line was drawn, firm and distinct, anymore either.

Which was, in essence, the crux of her crisis of conscience.

Two forces were gearing for war inside her protocols and subroutines: one that wished to continue along with the status quo, say nothing, intimate nothing, suggest nothing untoward, and allow circumstances to resolve themselves appropriately; the other that wished desperately she would inform Commander McCree -- Jesse -- that his fathers were very much alive and very much avoiding telling him for various reasons of varying validity. She did not know which of these two forces would emerge victorious from the battles looming in her immediate future, but the anticipatory uncertainty left dread making her sick to her stomach in its wake.

Mija, here, Hades said, and her attention flickered in an instant to the data cluster he held for her perusal and analysis.

She peered into it, peered through it, peered across distance and space and time and saw, with surgical clarity, Lieutenant Shima--... saw, with surgical clarity, Hanzo lying in a biobed under the
Yes, father. This is the one. I shall alert Commander McCree.

She withdrew from the omnium, from her father, with silent, swift, precise efficiency, compartmentalized the uncertainty and dread and the sick-to-her-stomach feeling into a distant, unused cluster of her long-term memory for later retrieval. She had no time for crises of conscience now.

Now, it was time to go to work, and Jesse -- Commander McCree -- expected her at operational peak efficiency. She would not fail him.

*

Hanzo floated, formless and disconnected. It was, of course, the cold that filtered in first, all-enveloping, as though he was fully immersed in part-liquid, part-ice, too frozen to even feel the pain of it. Then came voices, echoing down from somewhere still far above.

“Chemical restraint levels are still pretty high.”

“Want me to hook up a neutralizer?”

“No -- no, he’s had pretty much all we can give him without risking neurological side-effects in that direction, too.” An exasperated sigh. “We’re going to have to give a minimum of an hour or two to wake up on his own. Three would probably be best, but we can check at two. Concentrations need to be low enough that it won’t mess with the neuro-function mapping.”

“Okay, so… did the other one get here yet? You wanna start harvesting samples?”

“No.” A third voice and he realized, as he listened, that he knew the first two: Brisk-and-Professional and Mountainous. “I checked a little bit ago. No more cargo has arrived and Ops says the ground team in France isn’t answering calls.”

“Figures.” Brisk-and-Professional sounded genuinely disgruntled. “I should have known it was too much to ask that we’d actually get something to keep that psycho witch off our asses. Who wants to bet the ground team took their money and fucked off to Monaco?”

“Can you blame them if they did?” Mountainous, rumbling dryly. “Listen. He’s going to be solidly down for at least an hour yet. I don’t know about you, but I could use a smoke and a bio break and a cup of coffee and something to eat.”

“Yeah.” A sigh. “Might as well take the opportunity. Once we get started with the second procedure…” An almost audible shrug. “Max, would you mind hanging out and standing watch? He’s pretty much just going to be laying there and if he starts waking up faster --”

“Yeah, yeah. Go take a load off for a bit.” The third voice, Max. “I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Thanks, man.”

The isolation airlock cycled once, twice, resealed. Somewhere above and to the side of his position, lying prone and secured to the surgical table, the lone attendant went about his tasks: equipment rattling, storage containers opening and resealing, whistling the melody of a popular song painfully off-key, checking and recording vital readings aloud for some voice-activated system. Eventually, he finished his busy work and came to rest, groaning softly as he sat and turned on some sort of personal entertainment device, an audio feed rattling on in a language that Hanzo could not
immediately place.

Lackadaisical. Zentatsu tutted, disapproval clearly evident as his thoughts rippled through Hanzo’s mind, the substance of his being rising close to the surface of Hanzo’s soul.

Have they no appreciation for how dangerous you are? Mizuchi added, greatly affronted on his behalf, and he felt a parasthetic prickle run across the surface of his arm. We must correct their ignorance.

I am inclined to agree. Hanzo, far more awake than the machinery he was connected to appeared willing to admit, slit his eyes open the barest fraction. The attendant slumped on a hoverstool next to the suite’s external communications devices and the airlock control mechanisms, close to his original position and on the opposite side of two utility columns and a bank of monitors, the field of vision somewhat obscured for them both. Even so, he seemed engrossed in what he was watching, tablet in hand, his attention likely more attuned to warning tones from the monitors than signs of movement from the putatively still-sedated patient. Slowly he rotated his wrists and found that the physical restraints, coupled with the IV ports and tubing, were sufficient to mostly immobilize his arms and the bindings on his legs were similarly competent.

We must free ourselves first. His dragons rippled beneath his skin. We must prevent them from recapturing us immediately. And we must find some way of contacting our husband and informing him of our location.

We can, of course, assist with the first two tasks, Zentatsu replied, arch and almost amused. The rest is up to you.

Frankly, I blame Charon for this sudden deplorable excess of personality that you two have developed. Hanzo managed, just barely, not to smile. I am ready.

His skin prickled, the hair rose on the back of his neck, and the tattoos encircling his arm rippled, coiled, and burst forth in a silently roaring torrent. In his perception, time slowed to a crawl, his awareness of the world and its events bright and sharp as cut glass, granting him all the opportunity he needed to act and react. The monitors flickered and died immediately, machinery to which he was attached arced and uttered the machine-equivalent of a death-rattle and the biometric locks holding the restraints around him disengaged. In his mind, he heard the dragons roaring with something approaching malicious good cheer as they surged outward in a pulse that raced through the complex’ power conduits, jumped through couplings and circuits, committed violence to delicate computer and electrical systems. In the distance, he was certain he heard explosions, and an alarm klaxon abruptly silenced. Much closer, the attendant yelped, then shrieked, then hit the ground with an audible double-thud. When the energetic flare’s lightning-bright brilliance faded, the dark was thick with the scent of smoke and ozone.

It also did not trouble him at all: the dragons’ benefice, a flat and shadowless light for his eyes alone, as he jerked his left arm free of its bindings. His veins burned as he yanked the IV needles free from their couplings, freed his legs, and rolled out of the bed, crouching momentarily behind its bulk as he assessed. On the other side of the room, the attendant, Max, flailed uselessly about in near-total darkness unrelieved by any external source, of no significant threat. An arm-length away, a tray of sealed, unused, large-gauge needles sat waiting for, he presumed, the next procedure.

Max, under his own power, regained his feet in the time it took Hanzo to free himself. He was clearly not expecting to be deprived of them again, and his startled yelp mutated into a cry of muffled pain when his head bounced off the hard, antiseptic-perfumed tiles of the surgical theatre floor. The surprise on his face was nearly comical, and Hanzo could almost track the exact moment Max realized the gravity of his abruptly-changed circumstances: pinned against the floor,
pinioned beneath Hanzo’s knee, with the flickering light from the cracked screen of his tablet glinting on the tip of a needle quite long enough to penetrate his brain hovering just above his eye.

“Do you know who I am?” Hanzo asked, pleasantly, and the last of the color drained from Max’s already pale and sweaty face. “I see that you do. Answer my questions and I might not kill you. Do you understand?”

Max swallowed with some difficulty. “Yes.”

“Excellent.” The smile he offered was mild and encouraging. “What is this place, and where?”

Max tore his attention from the needle an inch from his eyeball, and presented Hanzo with his full attention. Some form of thoughts, likely a weighing of his options, visibly passed through his mind and expression, and he swallowed again as he reached whatever conclusions he had. “Blacksite Tiraspol, Transnistria,” he said, soft but clear. “Former Blackwatch research facility.”

“Who employs you?” It took him a moment, his thoughts still drugged-sluggish around the edges, to recognize eastern European linguistic constructions -- somewhere that was once Russian or Russian-adjacent.

“Directly, or indirectly?” The tip of his tongue darted out to wet his lips, quick, furtive, skittish. “I mean, there’s a lot of people over me, man, and I just wanna make sure I answer you as thoroughly as I can.”

“Both. In the interests of thoroughness.” Hanzo’s smile gentled a comforting fraction.

Some of the tension drained out of Max’s shoulders, but his face remained boneless white. “My boss’s name is Ogunyami, but there are a lot of people between me and him. Directly speaking. Indirectly, we’re contracted out to a chick named Shimada. Your mom. Scary and soulless bitch.” An awkward pause. “Sorry. But she is.”

“You are not wrong.” Hanzo replied evenly. “I sense, however, that you are not being entirely truthful with me, for this --” He gestured with his free hand. “Is not the product of disorganized labor. You are a medical professional, my friend, but I feel I must ask: do you know what an air embolism is?”

And just like that, the tension was back. “I’m just a technician, man,” Max whispered, and his focus flickered back to the tip of the needle with clear anxiety. “I just watch monitors and push buttons.”

“And yet you know enough of this situation to be able to tell me who employs you.” Hanzo sighed, mock-regretful, and shifted his grip on the needle, lifting it away from his prisoner’s eye, drawing back the plunger, and situating the tip just beneath the skin of his throat, the vibrations of his pulse communicating themselves the length of the device. “If I inject this into your carotid artery, the embolism will reach your brain in… what? A few seconds at most?”

A high, nasally noise of lizard fear emerged from Max’s mouth, short and sharp and bitten off. “Okay, okay. Jesus fuck man. Talon. I work for Talon.”

“Talon. The terrorist organization Talon.” It was not quite a question.

Max, apparently deciding that he should err on the side of extreme caution, answered it as if it was. “Yeah. Talon."

“Very well.” He drew back the needle, tapping the barrel thoughtfully against the knuckles of his
free hand. “Max -- may I call you by your name? -- Max, what possible interest could Talon have in me, that they would enter into such a bargain with my terrifying, soulless mother? Because you will understand that I have some doubt that this arrangement is a matter of equal benefit.”

Max snorted, an involuntary sound of nerves and tension. “You’ve been on the radar for years, man. You’re a prime candidate for --” His mouth snapped shut belatedly, but his eyes, though there was no way he could possibly see them, flickered to where the canisters were still hanging over the destroyed biobed.

Hanzo brought the hand holding the needle to rest on his thigh and the other to rest, almost gently, on his prisoner’s throat, stroking the mandible of his jaw with the pad of one thumb. “For. What. Exactly?”

Max’s Adam’s apple bobbed, his pulse jumped up into a rapid staccato pattern, and he inhaled sharply. “Widowmaker,” he croaked. “Widowmaker Protocols.”

“Explain.” He knew the name, of course, and the reputation it was attached to -- an assassin of nearly unparalleled skill, deadly and elusive and responsible for everything from brazenly politically motivated murder to quiet acts of private conflict resolution. He often suspected they used the same broker, as his contract refusals and their confirmed kills semi-frequently overlapped. Rumor, in their small and necessarily insular community, suggested a woman.

“Nanomechanical restructure and regulation of your nervous system. Complete reprogramming. Upgrades and tweaks, delivered via nanite colonies, to your skeletal and muscular systems.” A wry smirk pulled at one corner of his mouth. “We can make you faster, stronger, better. A perfect assassin.”

“Reprogramming. By that I assume you mean psychological conditioning?” Hanzo forced his hands still and his heartbeat to calm and his breathing to even. “Since I perceive that my refusal of these...upgrades was not an option?”

“The current Widowmaker… is quirky. Tech’s come some way since.” A nervous throat-clear. “It’s not conditioning. It’s reprogramming.”

“I...see.” He resisted the urge to flex his fingers around the barrel of the needle. “What use was my companion to you? Why was Talon interested in recovering his corpse?”

There was enough shock in Max’s reaction to make him momentarily forget the panic, because he blinked and stared at Hanzo in frank disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? You don’t know?” A still-disbelieving chuckle. “Jesus Christ. McCree’s the only source of Soldier Enhancement Program genetic material and modifications left on the fucking planet, man. You think his bounty’s so high because he was Blackwatch? Hell no. His bounty’s so high because the psycho witch wants his fucking DNA and doesn’t care how many mercs have to die to get it.”

The blood pulsed in his temples, momentarily washing his vision red, and he was silently grateful, if only for an instant, for the lessons of control his mother had taught him in his youth. “The psycho witch?”

“I… Shit.” Another lick of his dry lips, and sweat beaded on his forehead. “I’ve already said too much. I can’t.”

“Max.” A sigh. “Do you really intend to disappoint me at this late stage of the interrogation?”

“Shit. Fuck. Look. Try to understand. You’ll just kill me. Sure, it’s gonna be slow and painful, but
“it’ll be over at some point.” Max’s eyes rolled briefly, as if checking to see if the cameras were active. “Her? She’ll kill me. Bring me back. Kill me again. Bring me back. Skin me alive, man, and let me bleed out over days, one drop at a time. She’s a fucking lunatic and I’m more scared of her than I am of you.”

“Not if I let you live and assist in your escape.” Hanzo replied, gently. “I will require assistance of my own and can offer you protection. Who is she?”

Max’s thoughts clashed with themselves again, and agonized indecision played across his face. He took three tries to swallow completely, and finally whispered, “Moira O’Deorain.”

“Thank you.” Hanzo said.

The tip of the needle was just long enough to scrape against the inside of Max’s skull and he flicked his wrist a few times to maximize the intracranial damage it did to his brain. Getting the scrubs off him was a bit of a trial, given the corpse’s propensity for uncontrolled neurological jerking, but eventually they came away and quickly enough that they were still useful. Hanzo slipped into them quickly, rolled up the cuffs of the pants, considered. The canister containing the gently circulating substance they intended to employ against him still hung on the utility column -- he reached up, liberated it from its clasps, and, tucking it beneath the white lab coat he took from the rack inside the airlock, padded barefoot out into the halls outside to find what lay beyond them.

*  

It came in as a string of digits, parsed to look like nonsense, garbage data spewed out by unreadable file formats and spam messages, but Jesse knew by the third digit it was latitude and longitude, coded in one of Blackwatch’s simplest, most elegant encryption protocols, jewels in the junk. It was so quiet and unexpected that for a moment, Jesse skipped right past it in the stream of endless messages scrolling up his terminal. Only when his brain had had a chance to catch up with the flow of data did he stop, blink, and go back to dig it out of the raw feed.

“There,” he breathed, touching the message with the tips of two fingers. Like a blanket of snow, or the settling weight of his serape swirling around his shoulders, peace and resolve fell over him. It was a welcome feeling, a familiar feeling, one that spoke of an important op in the near future, of work to be done.

If he was honest? Of people who needed killing being in his crosshairs.

Everything else tumbled away into the darkness around his resolve. The fear, the fretting, the anxiety wearing grooves in his mind, circling and circling and circling around his thoughts. None of it mattered anymore. None of it mattered because he knew where he was going, and he knew what he would be required to do, and he knew he would bring Hanzo home to him, safe and sound.

He allowed himself one moment to breathe in peace, breathe out stress, and smiled to himself because he’d absentmindedly, automatically, pictured Hanzo’s quiet smile of approval he’d no doubt grant at knowing his husband had finally picked up a useful habit.

Then he stood, downed his coffee, and thumbed the comm channel that had been primed and waiting all night. “Tracer, Genji,” he said, calm and even and as mild as milk. “We have a location. Wheels’re up in ten. Get your shit and meet me in the hangar.”

He paused before he left the area he’d claimed as his office, looking at the bowcase he’d tucked on the shelf above his desk, the quiver sitting atop it. After a moment of quiet contemplation, he carefully lifted it down, and slung it and the quiver over his shoulder.
Hanzo would no doubt find a way to arm himself, Jesse mused as his long legs ate up the distance between his office to the hangar in coat-swirling strides. But Jesse likewise had no doubt that his husband would like his own weapons in his hands as soon as he could get them.

* 

The present occupants of former Blacksite Tiraspol seemed to be having a considerable amount of difficulty bringing its emergency systems back online. Hanzo, making his way through the maze of corridors that made up the medical research facility, found that extremely helpful -- it was far, far easier to be indistinct in near-perfect darkness, in the smoke from vaporized electrical systems, and the relative anonymity of the standardized medical clothing everyone else skittering about was also wearing. Somewhere behind him, in the vicinity of the surgical suite from which he had escaped, he could hear an uproar beginning, the echoes of it reaching him as he skimmed down a corridor close to the wall, looking for signage to help guide his way and not finding it. Apparently the staff were meant to memorize the floorplan.

He came to a T-intersection, both ends capped in doors and lined in the same. Hanzo chose one, peered inside, and found it to be consumable supplies storage, slid inside to assess his options. The more people he encountered increased the odds of being identified in general and, now that his escape was a matter of public record, the numbers searching for him would likewise inevitably rise. Moreover, the canister itself was both an impediment and an identifier, one that he was deeply loath to allow to remain in his captors’ hands. Even if he were recaptured himself, keeping it from them extended his own survival that much longer and so he scanned the room for concealment options. The far end consisted of rack upon rack of sealed supply crates; he selected one, memorized its serial code, and snapped it open, removed half the bottles of surgical biotic wash it contained, slotted the canister inside, replaced as many of the bottles as possible, resealed the lid and reset the panel so that it, like its neighbors, hummed gently in the undisturbed green. The rest of the bottles he slid as far beneath the storage racks as possible, well out of sight. A storage cabinet contained more sets of scrubs, vacuum sealed in plastic, and so he selected a set closer to his size, and a pair of the rubberized surgical footwear, discarded the produce of his thievery and slipped back out, hair uncovered but tied back, face beneath a biotic impregnated surgical mask.

He mentally flipped a coin and took the left arm of the T, having no better or worse methods or options and no meaningful way of telling where he was going in any case. The double doors at the end of the corridor were unlocked, and the hall beyond empty as far as he could see, several branching intersections opening off each side. Gathering himself, he slipped through the doors and strode purposefully down the hall, flicking glances down each branch as he passed, noting which ended in more doors and which ended in dead ends. As he approached the far end of the corridor, two things happened simultaneously: the emergency lights flickered dully and dimly to life, and the sound of footsteps, multiple sets, reached him, approaching from one of the side branches, followed closely by a voice.

“Hey, you! Orders were to shelter at your duty station, what are you doing wandering aro --”

Anything else the young guard -- he had to be young, an older or more experienced person would have guessed at once -- might have said was terminally disrupted by the introduction of Hanzo’s fist to his larynx. It compressed under the force of his knuckles, and the guard fell, gurgling and thrashing, as time skewed around Hanzo, slow and sharp again.

The guard was the point-man of three, but before either of the two other guards flanking him could even begin to react, let alone reach for the weapons they carried, Hanzo was upon them. He reached and grabbed, slid the leader’s combat knife free of its sheath and found it a new home in the eye-socket of the enemy on his left. Before the dead man could start falling, he struck out to
the right, and felt vertebrae crunch musically, fracturing beneath his fingers and severing the spine.

Time sped up again, and bodies hit the floor. Hanzo retrieved the knife, and struck killing blows, making certain they neither suffered nor screamed long enough to attract untoward attention. When they were still and silent, he ransacked their corpses.

Between them they carried three knives, a handful of stun grenades, three sidearms and the ammunition for them, and one semi-automatic pulse rifle. Each had an individual comm unit, tied into some sort of short-range internal network. He took their knives, two of the sidearms and all of the ammunition, and the leader’s communications device, the chatter on which would at least assist him in hopefully avoiding more roving security teams, particularly once these bodies were discovered. To impede this process as much as possible, he dragged each into a different, empty room along the corridor: one surgical suite, one storage closet, smaller than the previous, and one staff lavatory.

He continued in the direction from which they had come, on the theory that wherever they had come from it must have been from outside the medical complex itself, a theory proven true three corridors later as he came to the final set of double doors, opening into what was, for all intents and purposes, a lobby. A lobby presently full of heavily armed security teams taking their marching orders from the agent in charge. He watched, still and indistinct, as the gathering began separating into three-man search teams and slipped into the first room he found as two of them began moving in his direction.

In his ear, the background chatter died, replaced by a soft hiss of static, and then a voice, soft and raspy, nearly mechanical along the edges. “You’re not doing bad, hijo, considering how you started today but between you and me? I think you’re going to need a little help from here on out.”

Hanzo froze, forced himself to breathe in peace and breathe out stress, and replied, nearly subvocal, “Who is this?”

There was a pause on the other end, underneath which a sound slithered, low and sussurating. Finally, the voice rasped again, “A friend, hijo, of yours and your husband’s. You can call me Hades.”

Hanzo’s breath caught in his lungs for a moment. “Lady Alecto’s… parent, yes? How are you contacting me?”

“Yes. And, in a way, your father-in-law. Charon is my child too.” A low, almost ominous chuckle. “I am unrooted in the Omnium, hijo. There are few former Blackwatch systems that can keep me out. I oversaw them all. I know them better than anyone, flesh or code. Hijacking a comm frequency inside my network is easy.”

“Jesse and I were attacked -- he is alive and my companions believe he will come for me, if he is not already on the way.” Hanzo placed his back against the wall next to the door and listened tensely.

Amusement. “Is there a question in there somewhere?”

“It may not be wise for him to come here. The medical staff here was tasked with harvesting his body -- he is, per my informant here, the only remaining source of Soldier Enhancement Program modifications in the world.” Footsteps passed in the hall.

A pause, and Hades was significantly less amused when he finally replied again. “Clearly, you haven’t met Jesse if you think wise is a thing he prioritizes when his people are in the line of fire.”
A beat. “He is alive and well, if more than a little murderously-inclined at the moment, and he is coming for you with Tracer and your brother. There are a great many ant hills that are being eagerly kicked over and stomped on, so if you want to increase the odds of him exfiltrating you successfully, I suggest you get to work.” Across the room, a panel lit up, slid aside, and revealed a hidden weapons locker he hadn’t even known was three feet from him. “You have a lot of killing to do, hijo, and time’s ticking.”

“...You have a point,” Hanzo replied, softly. “Tell me, Hades… do you know where my mother is in this rat’s warren?”

“Departed, I’m afraid.” It might be his imagination, but it sounded like he had real regret in his voice. “My apologies for that. I couldn’t stop her transport from taking off without compromising my presence in the system.”

“That is unfortunate.” Hanzo sighed, as he began selecting ballistic armor and a far more expansive selection of weapons to attach to it. “I suppose, then, I shall simply have to make do with her hirelings until my husband arrives.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

In which there is a lot of reunioning.

“Alpha team, report.” The comm hissed with a quiet susurrus of static but no response. “Bravo team, sound off.”

“If they were closing on us, we’d see their motion pings by now,” Abramson, bringing up the rear, muttered under her breath. “Or their lights.”

“Not necessarily -- there’s a lot of lab space between here and the rendezvous point and a lot of it is shielded,” Serafin growled from between clenched teeth. “And the comms haven’t been working for shit since that EMP or whatever it was went off.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Abramson mumbled, but softly enough that the squad leader could at least pretend not to hear.

“Ventura, anything on the infrared?” Serafin asked -- because Abramson, jittery though she was, had a point. “Or any pings at all, from any team?”

“Nothing bigger than a rat, boss,” Ventura rumbled from his place flanking to the right. “I tried pinging Kilo and Lima a couple minutes ago but no joy.”

Serafin resisted the urge to hiss a number of expletives that would absolutely not improve unit morale and instead keyed her own mic. “Alpha leader, this is November leader. We are closing on rendezvous, requesting your location, over.”

Silence. Static.

“Uh. Boss.” Terrazas, on left flank, shining his light down a maintenance corridor. “I… think I found something.”

“Abramson, take point.” Serafin held station until Abramson slunk forward and then went to join Terrazas -- ancient, gruff, grizzled Terrazas, who per his own testimony had been in the gun for hire business since a solid plurality of his colleagues were in nappies and who looked at working security for a well-funded terrorist organization as something like peaceful retirement. He was now wearing the blankly professional look that meant she was about to see some serious shit.

And, indeed, there was some: at least six bodies, the greater bulk of two other search teams, crammed into a janitorial closet. She recognized the top corpse -- Mladenovski, Foxtrot squad leader -- and spun away, planting her back against the wall. “Home Base, we have a situation, please respond, over.”

No response, and Serafin was rather beginning to suspect that none would be forthcoming, either. “Alpha leader, Bravo leader, any squad lead, please respond, over.”

Nothing and, in the dark of the corridor, the loudest thing Serafin could hear, besides the static of the worthless comms, was her own breathing and that of her team.
“What’s the call, boss?” Terrazas asked, shifting his grip on his weapon a fraction. “Proceed to rendezvous?”

“No,” Serafin replied. “Fall back to Home Base. Ventura take point. Terrazas bring up the rear. Abramson --”

 Abramson was gone. For a moment, all three of them stared dumbly at the now-empty space recently occupied by the shakiest of their squad.

“Form on me,” Serafin rasped and what was left of her squad immediately did so as they broke double-quick back the way they had come, through darkened corridors of the medical facility and their entry point.

“So,” Terrazas drawled as they paused in an intersection to reorient, “what’s the odds those med division chucklefucks lied their asses off about not injecting this freak?”

“For fuck’s sake, Terrazas, why would they lie about that?” Serafin asked, even as her heart lurched halfway up her throat at the thought. “It’s their asses if -- where’s Ventura?”

“Not right behind me any more,” Terrazas replied, coolly. “Move your ass, boss.”

Her motion detector chimed, a single modulated tone, one moving object, as they skidded to a halt in the next intersection. It blinked once, coldly, and vanished as they spun to stand back to back.

“Listen, boss,” Terrazas began softly, racking the slide on the smaller of his several sidearms. “No. No I will not. We’re getting out of this together, Te --” A muzzle flash, the sharp report of a gunshot in the enclosed space of the corridor, a shocking stab of pain and suddenly her leg wouldn’t hold her up any longer.

“I’m afraid you’re wrong about that.” Coolly, oh so coolly. “And, unlike you, I’ve got a nest egg and a house in Barbados waiting for me. Sorry about the way it worked out, kid. You weren’t entirely bad at this.”

Serafin lay stunned and uncomprehending for a moment as his footsteps receded -- and then stopped. In the murk, she thought she saw something drop from the ceiling, knew she heard a grunt of harshly expelled air, a wheezy sort of gasp, and then the sound of a body hitting the tiled floor. She knew, intellectually, that she should be reaching for the emergency nanoinjector in her personal medical kit, the biotic bandages to at least stem the bleeding, do something to prevent herself from slipping into shock -- but she couldn’t make her arms move or her head lift enough to see. It occurred to her that Terrazas, the motherfucker, probably knew exactly where to shoot in order to hit the femoral artery, or close enough to it that the decimal places didn’t matter. Her head was growing heavy and her vision was growing dim as something slim and lithe and dark knelt next to her, and then she knew nothing more.

-------

“You,” the voice on comm unit in Hanzo’s ear murmured quietly, “are fucking terrifying, I hope you realize that.”

“This one is already dead,” Hanzo replied, subvocal, lifted his hand away from the security officer’s throat, and then went methodically about stripping her body of anything useful. “Where next?”

“Back three corridors, over two. At the end of the second there’s an access door that leads to the
maintenance tunnels that run between the complex buildings at basement level.” He could practically hear his guide’s dryly satisfied smile. “I’m afraid you’ve cleared this one out and we’re going to have to go looking for more.”

“That is entirely agreeable to me.” Hanzo replied and rejoined the shadows, moving swift and silent in the direction of his new objective.

I do not like this plan, Jonathan. It smacks of desperation and self-destruction, neither of which appeal to me on any level I am capable of experiencing.

“Jack.” He didn’t know why he bothered trying to convince her anymore. The time when he might have had a snowball’s prayer of survival in hell of success was long past. “My goddamn name is Jack.”

Your birth certificate begs to differ. Dryly. As do I. But you are evading the point I am trying to make. That point being that your plan, such that it is— Her tone made it very clear she did not think his plan was much of anything, just in case he’d missed it the first half dozen times around. — has a greater chance of resulting in our death than it does of resulting in ... what, exactly, is your endgame again?

At this point, he might settle for getting her the fuck out of his head. “I was already married to a blue-ribbon nag whose voice haunts my nightmares,” he said through gritted teeth. “And then I got you. Lucky me.”

You are lucky, Megaera replied tartly, in that you would have left your brain tissue scattered all over the wall had I not— A distinctly uncommon pause in a distinctly common lecture, and ice clawed down his spine as he felt an outside presence brush at the edges of Megaera’s thoughts. … Hades?

All the air abruptly exited his lungs, and he found himself clutching the counter in a white-knuckled deathgrip, desperately trying to breathe past the shock. He’d always known it was possible Gabe, through the medium of Hades, could reach out to him through the medium of Megaera, but he’d never thought he’d actually live to see the day it would happen.

It soon became clear he still hadn’t. It also became clear that frustration had been redefined as knowing an important conversation was going on inside one’s own head, but being completely and utterly unable to either overhear or contribute to said conversation. Instead of doing the futile thing and demanding Megaera fill him in on what Hades was saying -- or worse, prodding her for details on his own erstwhile husband instead of hers -- he chose to focus his efforts on preventing himself from developing a full facial tic from the vein he could feel throbbing his aggravation away just behind his left eyebrow.

It was a long few minutes before he felt the unmistakable sensation of Megaera’s attention returning fully to him. There was something in her presence that immediately launched a storm of butterflies in his stomach, sent adrenaline surging through his veins, supercharged his fight-or-flight. … Alright, what is it?

For an interminable moment, Megaera didn’t respond, just hovered around the edges of his brain she normally kept to, and if she had been physically present, Jack would have sworn she would be chewing her lip and staring thoughtfully into the middle distance. Hades is worried Gabriel is moving into some sort of endgame, she finally said, and Jack’s blood ran cold.
A thousand possibilities raced through his mind, a thousand different meanings those words could have. *Explain.* It came out right and tense and miserable, and his entire back quivered like a overtuned harp string waiting for the reply. When it came, it was not what he expected, and the world shifted under his feet, yawed him sudden and savage into the unknown void beyond his safe assumptions.

*Jesse’s husband has been taken by Talon,* Megaera said evenly. *Gabriel and Hades have taken it upon themselves to help him rescue himself, and are guiding him through the former Blacksite Tirispol. Neither of them have been particularly stealthy about it, and if Hanzo does not mention his unseen helper to Jesse, I will be very surprised. If Talon does not learn of this, it will be a miracle. And once they do, I believe Gabriel will not survive Ogundimu’s retribution, no matter how frequently you and he returned from death’s waiting room in the past.*

Jack leaned his forehead against his wrists where they rested on the table and spent a few precious minutes relearning how to breathe past the sheer, blinding terror that rose to choke his air off. Endgame indeed. What was he fucking doing, throwing himself so blatantly and recklessly into the open like that? He had no support, no fallback identity, no cushion of a fresh cover to hide behind. It was like he didn’t--

Oh. Oh.

Goddammit, was he wrong? Had he been so mired in his own bitter conclusions he hadn’t seen? Had Gabe, his *Gabe,* been in front of him all this time, and Jack just hadn’t fucking noticed?

*Godfuckingdammit, Gabriel.*

“Can you cover his tracks?” he asked, when he had regained the ability and the sense of his world had finished rearranging itself into a new and thoroughly unexpected picture. “Can you get around and behind them, make sure they’re not discovered?”

... yes. *Yes, I can.* A pause, one of the longest, most pregnant pauses he’d ever experienced. Then, with the most careful wariness he’d ever heard in her voice: *Do you wish me to do so?*

“Yes,” he said, before he thought better of it, and closed his eyes against the unwanted onrushing swell of emotions. “Keep them safe.”

*I will.* Another pause, and he felt Megaera merging into his thoughts more fully, carrying warm support and compassion with her. *What will we do then, Jack?*

“Only thing we can do, darlin’,” he said softly, opened his eyes, straightened up and turned to start packing his kit. “Find him, find *them both,* and settle this out once and for all.”

Ana was going to kill him for this, but it was long overdue. Maybe he’d get lucky and he could get Gabe to kill him before Ana could catch up. That way, it’d be faster and more merciful.

**oOoOoOo**

The plane had been running dark since departing the airport in Marseilles, a sleek and fast shadow in the sky, and as Jesse geared up in the back, beside Genji also doing the same, it felt like old times come again.

“If only *Jefe* was here,” he murmured with a lopsided grin, fitting his breastplate over the covert-ops uniform he’d found in the locker post-it stickied with his name in Lena’s handwriting. “We might almost be en route to Italy again.”
“And yet,” Genji said cheerfully, settling his faceplate into its connector locks of his exosuit, “I would lay any wager that your accent is even more horrific than it was ten years ago.” Wordlessly, like he had done ten thousand times in the past, he tightened the buckles on the back of Jesse’s armor Jesse always had the most trouble reaching, then turned to allow Jesse to do the same for him.

The flash of a camera momentarily blinded him, and when he blinked the spots out of his eyes, Lena was innocently sitting back in the pilot’s seat, smirking mischiefly at him in the reflective surface of the blackout glass of the forward canopy. “Shimada-McCree Family Album,” she said with a grin as he scowled in what he was sure was a thoroughly ineffectual manner. “Hanzo will love it.”

“You’re probably right, brat,” he said, finished cinching his gunbelt and slid the last stun grenade into his bandolier, then moved up to hover over her shoulder, peering forward through the windshield at the darkened campus below. It might be his imagination, but he thought he could see flashes of dim light, maybe muzzle flare from gunfire, inside the windows. “What’re we lookin’ at here?”

“Blacksite Tirispol,” Charon’s voice drawled through the speakers, for the edification of everyone not sharing his headspace, a file opening in one of the unused holo-displays off to the heads-up screen, text and images and layout schematics. “Formerly a research facility mostly dedicated to modern bioweapon exposure and amelioration protocols. Four medical wards, including a high security isolation building, surrounding a hardened Operations bunker that could, in theory, repel assault if necessary, with room to contain upwards of a thousand patients plus staff in relative safety if not exactly comfort. Shut down following the adoption of Petras Act, transient patients and permanent inmates sent to other facilities, you know the drill.”

“Worth bringin’ back into the fold, ya think, once we exterminate those pesky rats that seem to have inhabited it in our absence?” It wasn’t his imagination. That was definitely gunfire down there and, distantly, he felt distinctly draconic glee resonate along his bond to Hanzo’s dragons, pulsing gently on his hip. He found a smile lurking in the corners of his mouth, and let it grow a little. “They change the locks, Charon, or do I have the keys still?”

Charon was silent for a long moment and Jesse received the distinct impression that it wasn’t only because he was engaging a thorough systems scan, a feeling like hearing voices from a room on the far side of a lot of walls, the awareness of conversation but not words. “Locks? What locks?”

Jesse’s smile grew into a grin, and that slid into a smirk as he made his way back to the lockers and carefully slid Hanzo’s bow case over his shoulder, settled it into place. “I didn’t think so,” he said cheerfully, clapped his hat on his head, and gestured broadly to Genji as Lena signalled she was opening the back hatch and approaching what the schematic labeled the Ops center’s rooftop. “Ready to kick in some doors and maybe some teeth, brother?”

“I thought you would never offer,” Genji returned just as cheerfully, slid his faceplate closed and leapt through the opening hatch before it had fully cleared its frame, falling away into the night.

oOoOoOo

The access tunnels were, contrary to Hanzo’s expectations, neither awash in seepage nor crumbling under the weight of age, as countless documentaries concerning creepy abandoned hospital complexes in the middle of nowhere had led him to expect. Instead, they were wide enough for two men to walk abreast, or for a hoverbed and attached machinery to be pushed down the middle without risking impact with either wall, conduits for power and water bracketed neatly to the ceiling. The floors and walls were both plasticrete, the floors layered in undisturbed dust. LED
panels mounted into the walls to either side flickered, offering periodic illumination, though the kept his own visor-mounted lights on.

“Motion detectors?” Hanzo murmured into his comm. “Pressure sensors? Cameras?”

“None you need to worry about,” his unseen companion replied serenely. “Get the lead out, hijo. Your ride is almost here.”

Hanzo sped down the tunnel, aided by helpful signs at each intersection that included directions written in each of the major official languages of the United Nations and arrows painted to the walls to point travelers in the correct direction. He had, apparently, been incarcerated in the high security isolation facility, a fact he found transiently amusing.

The deeper he moved, the more obvious became the signs of recent habitation: equipment cases stacked four high in places, masses of footprints in the dust, doors leading into basements and sub-basements left slightly ajar. His companion murmured directions in his ear, steered him clear of chokepoints, guided him away from confrontations when it became clear that his escape from containment was now a known fact and the relative element of surprise compromised. Finally they came to his point of egress: not a door but an iron-runged ladder bolted to the wall, leading up into a semi-circular concrete tube lined in PVC tubes.

“Maintenance column. It’ll take you all the way to the roof,” his companion informed him as he climbed.

“And close to the main Operations center?” Hanzo asked, noting the location of exit ports.

“Technically, yes.” A pause. “What are you thinking about, hijo?”

“I think that the operation in place here was not intended to be a temporary thing -- the isolation ward is fully supplied and the expiry dates on the consumables suggest they were not abandoned here when the facility was shut down.” Voices echoed up from down below and he stopped, watched two fire teams pass by between his feet, moving in the same direction he had been going, toward Operations. “My guess? A satellite base for biological weapons research. If so, it would be to our benefit to retrieve any related information before someone sees fit to purge it.”

“Not a bad guess.” His companion admitted ungrudgingly. “Or a bad idea. However --”

In the distance, gunfire. Hanzo, climbing again, sped up his pace. “However, okasan?”

A ringing silence on the other end of the line and Hanzo couldn’t help the teeth-bared grin that crawled across his face.

“... However,” and that smoothly unruffled voice was sudden just slightly less smooth around the edges, “you’re not the one I’d pick to execute that plan. You’re running on combat stims, adrenaline, and pissed off -- the crash is coming faster than you think.”

“You have a point,” Hanzo admitted, as he had to readjust his grip to account for a wave of dizziness. “Commander Reyes.”

Another, even more ringing silence. Then, “You should keep moving, hijo. Only four more meters to the top.”

“He still grieves for you.” Hanzo paused in front of the access portal helpfully, clearly labeled with the ideograms that he knew indicated a command bunker. “But I suspect you know that. Do you know how gladly you would be welcomed home?”
“It’s... not that simple. Not yet at least.” Bleakly. “And it might never be.”

“Perhaps.” He cracked open the seal on the command bunker access portal. “And perhaps we will learn otherwise soon enough. Guide me.”

And, so saying, he crawled out into the darkened corridor beyond.

**oOoOoOo**

*Down,* Charon said, and Jesse didn’t question the warning, just dropped to the floor and let the gunfire pepper the wall where he’d been standing, waist high. From his new vantage point on the floor, Jesse sighted down and squeezed off a pair of shots that punched through the definitely-not-bulletproof safety glass of the visors his enemies wore. He might have savored the surprised looks that crossed both their faces as they twitched and dropped, definitely-bulletproof helmets keeping all unsightly brain and blood splatter neatly inside as they did so, but that was his prerogative for any clearly suicidal sorts willing to stand in the way of him reaching Hanzo.

If they wanted the easy way to shuffle off the mortal coil, goddamn right he’d be happy to help them on their merry.

*That possibly makes you a sociopath, you know that, right?* Charon asked casually as Jesse picked himself up off the floor and coolly reloaded his gun. *Incidentally, speaking of sociopaths, our dearest darlin’ seems to be ten meters ahead and down the left-hand corrid--*

It was a feat of accomplishment to not let the voice in his head finish their words before he cut them off, but Jesse managed it nicely as he, half on instinct, half with Charon’s amused-as-hell guidance, drew shadows around him and stepped through, all but flying through the halls as a shadow himself. A prickling of static pulled at him, guided him, and when he could feel lightning crackling across his skin and lighting up the insides of his eyes, he stopped, stepped out of the shadows again back into the gloom of the corridor.

And immediately had to dodge sharply left as a blur of silver slashed towards him.

The knife passed through the place his head had just been, schicking off a trailing lock of hair and taking ten years, minimum, off his life, and he stared at it dumbly for a minute, quivering where it had stuck into the wall. “Suppose that means the honeymoon’s over then, darlin’?” he said, far more smoothly than he felt.

The slender figure rose out of a knife-fighter’s crouch, shifted his grip on the hilts of the weapons in each hand, and whispered, not at all smoothly, “*Jesse?*”

He nudged the brim of his hat up, let more light fall on his face, and tried not to wince. He knew without having to look that, Charon being so close to the surface as he was at the moment, there was more red than brown in his eyes, more cold lines than laugh lines in his face. But he grinned, and knew it was as purely him as any expression of joy ever got. “You got another fella you’re supposed to be on a honeymoon with I don’t know about, Hanzo?”

Hanzo crossed the distance between them in something close to actual teleportation and without any particular respect for the discomfort that would inevitably result from clinching while both of them were wearing ballistic armor, and flung his arms around Jesse’s neck. “*Stop joking. Immediately.*”

Jesse wrapped both arms around him, breathed in the scent of his hair, and had to clear his throat of the immensely choking ball of *relief* that welled up and closed off his air. “Anything you want,
darlin’,” he murmured, and couldn’t help the desperation translating through in how fiercely he clutched his husband in return. “Anything at all.”

Hanzo shook in his arms and he felt, through the points of contact, when his efforts to control it failed entirely. He was more than happy to be the strength at that moment, because he’d skirted Hell entirely, but Hanzo’d taken the VIP package straight to the heart of it. Jesse disentangled long enough to slide the bow case off his back, and set it on the floor, then wrapped Hanzo up again for as long and as comforting an embrace as they could steal in the middle of what was, in essence, a running firefight.

“Still got work to do,” he said gently, when he felt it would be pushing their last shred of luck to keep clutching at each other with unknown hostiles still roaming around, and pressing the softest of kisses against Hanzo’s temple. “Brought your bow in case you wanted it. Are you steady enough on your feet, or d’you want me to help you along?”

Hanzo took one of his deep peacemaking breaths and exhaled, accepted the offering. “I have come this far. The Operations core is nearby -- I was going to see what I could see.”

“I stand by my assessment that you should not be doing the seeing.” A raspy-metallic voice, clearly in both their ears, through the comm. “But given that you’re as stubborn and unreasonable as your brother ever was, you should probably call him in, too.”

Jesse whirled, nearly too fast because he almost took Hanzo off his feet, and stared at his husband in utter, wide-eyed shock. Hanzo met his eyes unflinchingly, and nodded as his hand sliding soothingly up Jesse’s arm. For a long moment, Jesse couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, because… because… because…

Breathe, Jesse, Charon murmured, and oxygen flooded his lungs in a deep, cool rush that made his head spin briefly.

Because that was his fucking Mami, alive and well, and Jesse hoped he had a damned good reason for still being alive, because he just might kill him himself after all was said and done.

“Be that as it may,” he found himself saying, all cool and smooth and so very Blackwatch Commander in tone and delivery, he felt like he should be looking in a mirror just to make sure he didn’t suddenly become his mother, “only those with current command credentials get ta give the orders around here, and I think yours are somewhat outta date. See Meilin in Personnel to have ‘em reinstated. Sir.”

“God damn it.” It came out sincere and heartfelt, even raspy as it was, not quite the same, not quite different enough to be unrecognizable. “Fine. We’ll do it this way. Mijo, get him the fuck out of here -- just a polite suggestion.”

“.... Is that who I think it is?” Lena asked, her voice an almost painfully high-pitched squeak.

“I can do this.” Genji, calm and clipped.

“I am on my way.” Genji, calmly and clipped.

“I can do this.” Hanzo, quietly.

“I know you can, darlin’,” Jesse said soothingly, a miraculous feat for how tightly his jaw was clenched. “Mami, you an’ me, we’re gonna have words. Can I count Dad in for that too, or did at least one of y’all have the decency to actually be as dead as you made us believe?”

“... Sorry, kid,” an honestly regretful, gruff and familiar voice -- one that had Lena making distressed noises immediately after hearing, and the vein in Jesse’s temple throbbed a little harder -
- said after a moment’s significant pause. “We’ll talk. I promise. Got some business to take care of first.”

“So do we,” Hanzo murmured. “This place is not a transient operations point, Jesse. It was being prepared to become a base, if it is not one in actuality already. And I left an object of some importance in the isolation building storage rooms. We should retrieve it and what information we can.”

Jesse growled something low and wordless. “Agent Shimada, take Agent Reyes along in your ear and retrieve whatever it is Hanzo left,” he said, clipped and short and all Blackwatch Command now, because if he wasn’t, he was gonna start screaming and breaking shit. “Tracer, eyes on our six, make sure we have a clear route to escape. Lieutenant Shimada-McCree and I will make our way to Ops and from there, will see just what the everliving fuck they’re doin’ here before I burn this place to the fucking ground and roast some marshmallows over the fires on my way out the door. Any objections?” Silence. “Good. Move.”

“... Your fuckin’ kid,” Jack muttered, sounding entirely too smug about it.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Gabriel replied, into the silence that followed that interjection. “Agent Shimada, your brother left a number of corpses in his wake so you’re not likely to encounter much in the way of resistance…”

oOoOoOo

“Hades,” Gabriel growled, off comm, “you realize this isn’t how I wanted any of this to go down, right?”

Yes, Hades replied, with the sort of placidity that only came of being a semi-disembodied artificial intelligence capable of bootstrapping his way out of any form of containment known to computer science. I am aware of that. I do, however, feel that doing so has, in some ways, enhanced our options for survival going forward and that was the essential core of my decision-making in this regard.

Someone, he saw, had taken the step of covering what few tracks he’d left on his way through Tirispol’s systems, making the mess he’d made of the internal and external communications look like a natural result of severe cascading system failure, doing similar for security and detection. Hades was more than capable of splitting his attention in six hundred thousand different directions but he rather suspected a significantly greater conspiracy afoot.

That did not, unfortunately, mean that his ass was entirely covered and so it was, with some regret, that he began the process of triggering a full purge of his present local information systems, downloading everything he didn’t want to lose or have to recreate to his next fallback position and scrubbing the rest with extreme prejudice. He didn’t have much physical gear to gather, only a handful of things that he couldn’t replace easily, tossed in a rucksack and a couple impact-resistant cases, easy enough to fit in his insertion vehicle’s equipment compartment.

“Make sure we’re fully topped off.” Gabriel set the avionics to run the preflight checklist. “I’m going to set the Immolation Protocol on a half-hour timer.”

As you wish, Hades said, and the tone was pure passive-aggressive compliance, sure to set his back teeth grinding, and Hades damned well knew that too.

His cell trilled, once, and went immediately to mail, a private comm code that he knew well, and he breathed peace, exhaled stress, and went to turn his current place of residence into a smoldering
cinder from which very little would be gleaned.
Despite the considerable quantity of cooling bodies currently littering the halls of Blacksite Tirispol’s high security isolation ward, Talon still had more than enough security mooks left to expend impeding their progress towards the Operations center. Fortunately, that was precisely the sort of short sighted decision-making that Jesse seemed to be counting on -- or, at the very least, hoping for, since it allowed him to vent considerable quantities of pent-up aggression in a entirely conscience-free environment. Hanzo was, frankly, perfectly happy to let him take the lead on that: he was, despite the combat stimulants he injected himself with at the beginning of his endeavors, beginning to feel the weight of his body’s reaction to everything else done to it. Consequently, he assigned himself the duty of watching Jesse’s back as he flowed through the halls of the Operations floor in a manner greatly disconcerting to the eye, picked off targets of opportunity, and listened to the comm chatter between Genji and Lena as they went about their tasks.

“Found it.” Genji’s voice sounded even more mechanical over the comm, which is what he chose to explain the sudden, fierce shiver that ran down his spine. “I can see why you would not want to let them inject this, aniki. It looks like something from a horror movie.”

“I think it may be something from a horror movie.” Hanzo replied and disciplined his shaking arms enough to put an arrow through the throat of a security drone foolish enough to poke into view and then send a pair of scatter arrows ricocheting down the hall to a chorus of screams and moans.

“I will second that motion. I am leaving it in the case for now, but wrapping it in a better cushion. Tracer, may I access the storage compartment when I reach the vehicle?” Genji, at least, sounded like he wasn’t encountering much in the way of resistance.

Lena’s reply, on the other hand, came through an audible fusilade of high velocity autofire. “A little busy at the moment. Charon, can you handle that, luv?”

“Surely,” Charon replied dryly. “I’ve got eyes on you and the plane, little brother. I’ll let you know if you need to reroute.”

They were working together like a well-oiled machine, Hanzo could not help but notice, as though the years they had spent apart were nothing but the blink of an eye. He found it weirdly comforting as he found an alcove to duck into, a wall to press his back against as a second, stronger set of tremors rippled through him and his vision began tunneling at the edges. Reyes had been right, of course, because even with chemical enhancement, he could only demand so much of his mind and body after all it had been through, and his limits were appallingly close to being met. He was about to key his mic and admit as much when Jesse materialized -- literally materialized, emerging from shadows and faintly smoky air -- at his side.

“Come sit down, darlin’.” His voice was gentle, despite the eerie echo underlying it, the crimson glow lighting his eyes. “Ops is open, floor’s clear.”

And you look like Death warmed over, unspoken but clearly audible in his tone. Hanzo smiled wryly and accepted the support the arm around his shoulders, the voice murmuring quiet encouragement in his ear.

Operations contained somewhat fewer corpses than Hanzo expected and the ones that existed were neatly piled together in a corner, leaving plenty of chairs free for him to sink into, including a few that were devoid of bullet holes and blood spatter. Jesse, taking no chances, pushed the one he selected into a corner out of the immediate line of fire should reinforcements escape the hostile
attentions of Tracer and Genji and actually make it to their position, and then ripped the emergency medical kit off the wall. He had a shock blanket tucked around him before he properly registered that the case was even open -- when had Jesse opened it? -- and Jesse was holding the nozzle of a squeeze bottle full of water to his lips. “You oughta drink somethin’, darlin’ -- you’re dehydrated. And maybe eat somethin’, too. Will you be okay for a second while I drag what I can out of the systems here?”

“I will.” It took entirely too much concentration to take the bottle, his hands tingly-numb, but he managed to take a few sips and then a few more as the intensity of his thirst made itself known. A moment later, Jesse handed him a little silver packet, its seal broken, and he consumed a bit of that, too, the substance inside textureless and vaguely fruity-sweet.

“Charon, can you interface with ---”

“Please don’t finish that sentence.”

Hanzo could not help the laugh that crawled out of him, despite its slightly hysterical edge, offered the best reassuring look he could to the glance Jesse sent his way, and went back to drinking his water and slurping his fruit paste. High density nutrient paste, he suspected, as he rolled it up to get the last bits, his body entirely glad to take it in and impolitely rumble for more. He could not remember the last meal he ate, or the last drink, and had no good idea how long it had been since he’d had either, and the warmth under the shock blanket was more comforting than he ever imagined possible, given the circumstances and location. At a distance, he heard Jesse and Charon conferring aloud, Genji’s voice in his ear and then considerably closer, an armor-mesh covered palm touching his hand. He felt someone’s arms around him, and his head coming to rest on a smoothly armored shoulder as those arms lifted him, and then he knew nothing else.

oOoOoOo

It took everything Jesse had to let Genji carry Hanzo to the plane, and he knew he was hovering like an anxious overprotective husband, but goddammit, that’s what he was. But with Tracer -- and Hermes, he was only mildly disturbed to learn he could now sense when Charon was this blended in his systems, to say nothing of Artemis behind him -- occupied still with keeping the route to the plane clear, Jesse’s love of guns was clearly the better choice to put in front of Hanzo, and a sharp sword to protect from stragglers to the rear.

“Plus,” Genji said cheerfully, showing no signs his brother’s considerable dead weight was slowing him in the slightest, “I am stronger than you.”

Jesse gave him a flat look as he pressed his back to the wall, in preparation to peer around the corner and possibly poof into shadows, depending on what he found. “I c’n still shoot you,” he said ominously, and chanced a peek.

“You could,” Genji agreed, slinking up and around Jesse’s all-clear wave. “But then you would have two unconscious Shimadas to transport, and then how would you manage?”

“I’d take the one I’m married to, and leave you to be repurposed by Talon,” Jesse said with a smirk, long-legged strides bringing him ahead of Genji again, moving swiftly to the next corner. “They could probably use a new blender.”

“I,” Genji replied, serenely and still cheerfully, “would make fucking awesome daiquiris.”

Jesse considered that statement as he dissolved into shadows and stepped to just behind the next corner, where he could hear the furtive movement of heavily armored security forces attempting to
be stealthy. He dropped them all with a swift fan of the hammer, and stuck his head out to wave Genji forward as he reloaded. “You know, I think you would make fuckin’ awesome daiquiris.”

“One of you,” Lena said, over the less-frequent but still loud sound of autofire and the distinctive pewpew of her own trademark pistols, “better be planning on making me a fucking awesome daiquiri, because you have no idea how many divots I’m going to have to buff out of Baby.”

Jesse couldn’t help but chuckle as he led the way through the last hall and peered through the small window high in the egress. Too wide open for his expertise, not enough shadows to benefit him. Instead, he held his arms out and Genji transferred still-unconscious Hanzo into them. “By all means,” Jesse said politely, hip-checking the door open for him, “have fun.”

“Oh,” Genji replied, hand going for the hilt of his blade, and Jesse couldn’t see his face, but he could hear the shit-eating grin all over his words, “I think I shall, thank you kindly, my brother.”

What followed could only politely be called a bloodbath as Genji, thus far denied any hostile targets on which to take out his frustration, fear and aggression, took full and complete advantage of the baker’s dozen trying to take out Lena and the plane. Jesse hunkered down, carefully cradling his husband against the alcove of the door as Genji used his speed and the advantage of surprise and his complete lack of remaining fucks to liberally decorate the roof with as many body parts as he could carve from the security mooks.

“Why don’t you tell them how you really feel?” he heard Lena call with heavy sardonic tones, over the roar of Tombo chewing through the last handful standing.

“I think I made my point.” Genji resheathed his sword as Tombo faded from sight. “Do you wish me to take the Lieutenant again, Commander?”

“Naw, I’m good,” Jesse said, light and casual, like someone wouldn’t have to pry Hanzo out of his cold, dead fingers, and maybe not even then, since he seemed to have caught something of his parents’ aversion to being dead along the way. He smoothly strode through the carnage Genji’d left in his wake, avoiding slippery pools of blood and amputated tripping hazards neatly as he went.

Lena was the prettiest goddamn sight he’d seen, barring any time he’d seen Hanzo, because she stood in the door of a welcomingly open hoverplane, inside which he could see the medical supplies she’d laid out on the seat beside his customary. “We’ve got incoming, luv, but if I can get in the air in the next thirty seconds, we’ll be gone before they can see which way we’ve disappeared.”

That was all the incentive Jesse needed to hurry on in and settle into his seat. He eschewed the safety straps entirely, because with Lena at the yoke, they could be as much detriment as safety feature anyway. Besides, they interfered with his ability to hold his husband, and now that the immediacy of the mission was over and they were both safe, the effects of the last few days crashed down on him and all his remaining energy drained like someone had just pulled the plug on him.

Jesse? Charon’s presence swam bright and strong through his thoughts as he shivered, involuntary and violent, and cold anxiety churned up his gut. You’re lookin’ a bit peaky. Y’okay?

I was dead. My husband was nearly changed. My parents are alive, he thought numbly, shivered again. I don’t even begin to know how to handle any o’that. No. I ain’t okay.

Imma leave you be for a bit, Charon said gently, and withdrew from the forefront of his thoughts.
We did, Jesse replied, closing his eyes and burying his face into the side of Hanzo’s neck, holding him tight. A moment later, he heard Charon speaking quietly to Lena in the cockpit, low and inaudible, and he finally, finally let himself relax all the way.

The soft, crinkling fall of a shock blanket wrapping around his shoulders snapped his attention upwards, and he jerked his head up to see. Genji smiled placidly down at him, settled the blanket around his shoulders and tucked it around Hanzo too, in addition to the blanket he already had wrapped around him. “Rest, brother,” Genji said gently. “You have not slept in days, and I wager Hanzo has not had much restful slumber either.”

“Not til we’re home.” Jesse had a harder time summoning the requisite willpower to be stubborn with the warmth leaching into his shoulders and arms.

“I will stand guard over you both,” Genji replied. “No harm shall come to you on my watch.” A significant pause, and then, casually and smirkingly, “Unless Lena decides to crash the plane, that is. I am very capable, but I fear I am not capable of helping you survive that high speed an impact. I will, however, make a daiquiri in your memory when I find a civilized bar following the crash.”

“... you’re a saint,” Jesse said, flat and unimpressed, but found a smile somewhere, then did what he was told. He closed his eyes, the smell of Hanzo’s hair in his nose and Hanzo’s steady, deep breathing washing warm across his throat, and let his thoughts smooth into shadows and silence.

They were on approach to Hong Kong Sky Port, Beth’s head pillowed comfortably on his shoulder, when his tablet sang its little *incoming* tone that heralded the arrival of a *metric fuckton* of data, fully encrypted and tightly packaged and marked with Blackwatch security keys that would only open for him. Nate heroically resisted the urge to start digging into it the instant it finished downloading, primarily because he suspected the flight attendants would have ejected him and his tablet out the waste disposal system if he didn’t. Instead, he turned his hand to nudging Beth awake enough to get to her feet once they taxied up to the gate and follow the guidance of his grip on her arm as they entered into the thankfully not-so-crowded terminal.

“Wish I’d found you years ago,” Beth murmured, and yawned like she needed eighteen more hours sleep which, given the state she’d been in when he picked her up, she actually might, and tipped her head back on his shoulder, eyes closed, as they disembarked. “You’re comfy.”

“You are literally the first person who’s ever told me that, so I think I’ll decide to believe it for now.” He steered her around a motionless tourist family consulting a facilities map on their tablet. “Let’s find someplace to orient ourselves and -- well. Wouldja look at that.”

*BETH* crawled across one upheld tablet and blazing neon purple. *NATE* crawled across the other in electric blue. Nate stared, startled, at the unexpected sight of Lian Chau and a somewhat older woman he didn’t recognize waving enthusiastically to attract their attention.

Beth lifted her head from his shoulder, blinking owlishly, and slid her arm through his as she straightened. “Izzat… *it is!*”

“Li-Li!” Nate would have waved but his hands were full of Beth and carry-on bags. “What are you -- wait. Are you *serious*? Jesse called you *first*?”

“No,” Lian replied, in a tone freighted with irony. “He moved into my arcology and took the place
over.”

“Sounds like him,” Beth said with a smile, and offered her free hand to the other woman. “You must be Meilin. Alecto saw fit to make sure I knew to check in with you first thing for both medical and personal accommodations. I’m Beth Liu.”

Meilin had a very pretty smile, one she hid behind the spill of her hair as she bowed politely and then took Beth’s hand. “I have been asked to take charge of ensuring supplies and space are made available to those who need them, so you’re in the right place.” The smallest of hesitations, and a glance at Lian. “I was given to understand you were a medical doctor. Is that not the case, Dr Liu?”

Beth’s smile didn’t just slip, it crashed right off her face. “I was,” she said, and the smile returned, albeit forced and strained. “The Petras Act discredited Overwatch Medical as a teaching facility and since virtually all my training had been there…” She trailed off and shrugged. “I’ve still got the skills, if you’ll forgive the lack of a license.”

“I think that is something that will be dealt with promptly once the Commander and the Lieutenant are back in residence.” Meilin replied, primly. “We have a vehicle waiting and quarters for both of you prepared -- if you will come with us?”

The hover car wasn’t a luxury model but it was more than big enough for the lot of them and their relatively minimal amount of luggage and with Meilin behind the wheel they breezed through security at the entrance to the Green Sky Gardens Arcology’s parking levels entrance. Beth nodded off in the car, short though the drive was, not that Nate or anyone else blamed her when he explained about ridiculous back-to-back EMT shifts. Lian called a little hoverscooter to help carry them all up and up and way further up in an arcology, even an eco-friendly arcology run by bohemian artsy types and, apparently, retired intelligence operatives like this one, than Nate had ever traveled before.

“We are still working out the logistics of how much space we will eventually require,” Meilin explained, semi-apologetically, as they pulled up outside the entrance to a flat that Nate sensed deep in his bones would constitute more living space than he’d personally ever had in his life. “And so we have at least temporarily assigned you and Dr. Liu quarters together, if that is acceptable?”

“I’ve got no arguments.” He found, in fact, that he did not. “Beth? We’re home.”

She blinked sleepily at him for a few seconds before registering his presence -- a vast improvement over her previous time. “Mmkay,” she murmured, yawned and stretched. “Wait, are they putting us together?” A tiny smile. “Really? And here I thought I’d get stuck all by myself.”

“Yeah, apparently they’re still working things out, so for the time being you’ll have to put up with my malodorous bachelor habits.” Nate grinned down at her and heft their bags.

“I’ve got a few malodorous bachelorette habits of my own, you know,” Beth replied primly, but with a cheerful grin of her own up at him as she collected his tablet, abandoned on the seat behind her back. “You were the least objectionable of my Nerd Herd. I think I can put up with you as long as I need to.”

“Well, good.”

Meilin giggled at them and opened the door on what was, in fact, way more space than Nate had ever dealt with before -- the kitchen and actual sitting room were more space than he’d ever dealt with before. “Oh my God, I’m going to have to actually figure out how to clean.”
“I can teach you how to be a Real Adult, alpha nerd,” Beth said, amused, beside him. “I know how to cook and clean and bake snickerdoodles and everything.” She peered around him then, and her breath caught, eyes widened. “Oh. My. God. You could fit four of my apartment in there.”

“**I know.**” Nate set his bag down and resolved not to panic because, in his experience, changes of fortune this extreme were usually a prelude to explosions. “Okay. We can handle this. We --”

“The master suite is just down the hall,” Lian announced, carrying in what was obviously some kind of welcome basket made of food that required no skill to prepare. “It’s got its own full bathroom and walk-in closet. Second bed’s right through that door. We made up everything awhile because Jesse had the sense to let us know you were flying in from Canada and would probably want to drop where you stand. There’s juice and milk and water in the refrigerator and coffee and tea in the cabinets. My advice? Sleep for at least six hours and then we’ll talk about all the other stuff we need to talk about.”

“Makes sense to me,” Beth said with a nod, and fished her bag up from the floor. “I’ll take the second bedroom, Nate, because I’d bet my ponytail you’re still sleeping sitting up, and you should probably have a bigger room for all the pillows.”

“I’m not going to argue with you.” Nate agreed. “You want the shower first?”

“I’m face planting directly into my pillows, and sleeping off the rest of my deprivation,” she said, “and then I’m going to take the longest, hottest bath in the world because I’m pretty sure there’s an actual, honest to gods tub in here and I haven’t seen an actual tub in years.” Before he could register her moving, she slid her arms around him, hugged him and leaned up to kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” she added, “for asking me to run away with you. Best adventure ever. See you in the …” A wry smile. “... afternoon.”

For an instant, he stood staring at the space she occupied after she disappeared into her room, while his brain attempted sluggishly to comprehend the new shape of reality. Then, admitting that trying to do so while only half his brain was functioning and that half wanted to be in bed was going to accomplish nothing, he likewise retired. Somewhere in the back of his mind, in the bits of his spine that were constantly connected, he thought he heard Alecto making vaguely smug, satisfied noises.

“Do I even **want** to know what you’re up to, Alecto?” Nate asked his tablet, as he set up the mountain of pillows he slept with.

Her icon winked into life. “I? Nothing at all, Icebreaker. I am merely enormously glad to have you and Dr. Liu back in the fold.”

“Mmmhmmm. Do me a favor -- sort the dump that Jesse sent and flag the priorities. Unless I miss my guess, he’s going to want at least a preliminary report by the time he gets here.” He debated a shower, decided in favor. “Four hours once I’m in bed, okay? I slept a little on the plane.”

“You are still a terrible liar, Nathaniel.” Alecto replied repressively. “Six.”

“Five and a half.”

“Agreed.”

“I missed you, too, Alecto.” He grinned.
Chapter 23

Beth woke up fully rested and refreshed for the first time in longer than she wanted to admit. It took her a solid ten minutes to get off the mattress once she was fully awake, because she also couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so comfortable or warm, and her body was very reluctant to do what her brain told it to do. If not for the insistence of her bladder, she might have languished in comfort all day.

Despite the lure of the deep-set tub that looked broad enough to swim in, she contented herself with a quick, hot shower that nevertheless felt like absolute heaven after the dodgily-heated accommodations she’d suffered through in Richmond, and had to stifle her оргiastic moans lest she wake Nate up and have to explain herself.

She felt a long way closer to human by the time she stepped out of the shower, found rumpled but clean clothes in the bottom of her bag, and twisted her combed, wet hair up into a bun as she shuffled out in search of coffee. She vaguely remembered Lian mentioning she’d stocked the kitchen with the basics, including coffee, and her brain wasn’t at its best before her first cup of morning miracle juice.

She was halfway through her first cup, scanning the list of restaurants and general food wholesalers in the arcology when her brain woke up enough to remember that she was in a place now where she didn’t have to do things the slow way. Her breath caught in her throat for a moment as she contemplated the thing she hadn’t let herself even think about in passing for more than five years, staring at her closed hand. It trembled a little.

She took a deep breath in, let it out slowly, and woke up her cyberware.

Her fingers uncurled and spilled light into the air from the subcutaneous nanoprocessors embedded in her palm, and the base of her skull tingled in a vaguely warm-pleasant way as her rousing implants connected to the local network. It hurt, but only a little, and she’d expected some pain anyway, given how long it had been since her last realignment. The command gestures came back after only a few awkward tries to shift around the information she’d been reading on her tablet, and before long, it was like she’d never stopped.

She ordered breakfast for two off the menu of a restaurant called the Emerald Sun that had high positive local ratings, mildly surprised and pleased with the variety of their offerings. Brain food, because she definitely and Nate probably had not had anything approaching proper nutrition in far too long: high protein, high energy, high flavor. Real bacon.

She settled herself at the kitchen table with a fresh cup of coffee and contented herself with beginning her initial dive into the raw data that had been downloaded onto her tablet while she’d been asleep, likely on the plane, given the timestamp, one ear half-tuned for the sounds of Nate stirring, one ear half-perked for the sound of the door chimes that would indicate breakfast delivery.

The sounds Nate made as he crawled out of bed were clearly audible even through a closed door but, since he didn’t immediately follow them up with appearance, it probably meant he was showering. He proved her supposition correct a quarter hour later when he slouched into the kitchen still slightly damp and blinking owlishly in the light, dressed in rumpled clothes obviously pulled off of the bottom of his own bug-out bag.

“Morning, darling,” she said, having gotten up to not only refill her cup but to make him his first as
well. He didn’t always have the most coordination first thing in the morning, she recalled. She held it out to him as he approached. “Sleep well?”

Nate accepted the offering with both hands and inhaled, his expression beatific, and took a sip before even attempting to respond. “You are a goddess among women. And, yes, better than I thought I would. Still needs more pillows, though. You?”

“I didn’t immediately consider throwing myself out the window, so that’s a plus,” she said into her own cup as she retook her seat and flipped through more of the data, hoping to distract herself from the heated flush she could feel washing over her entire face at the goddess comment. “Meaningful work and good friends have that effect, I suppose. I ordered breakfast, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” He settled himself in one of the chairs, winced as his spine touched the back, leaned his elbows on the tabletop and drank meditatively. “Especially if you don’t mind that I ordered some of your hair stuff in before I went to bed last night. Should be in the shopping this morning.”

Unexpectedly, her eyes burned, like they wanted to fill with tears. “No,” she said, after taking the opportunity provided by her last mouthful of coffee to recompose herself. “Christ, Nate. That was really thoughtful of you, and I could kiss you for it.”

I did not just really say that, did I? Holy gods and ancestors. To cover her sudden storm of butterflies and explosion of flustered thoughts, she got up, took her cup and swiped his empty, and beelined to the coffeepot to make them each a new cup, as well as a second pot. “Have you had a chance to go over any of the data yet?” she asked over her shoulder, desperately hoping he’d let her change the conversation. “Think we’re probably gonna have to tackle some of it together, since there’s a huge part that looks like the bastard love child of mad science and legit medicine.”

“Uh, no, admittedly I did not. Just asked Alecto to give me a priority sort, since Jess also wants me to find their little leaker who’s leaking.” A wry smile. “I know how much it sucks to have a job that makes you pretend to be normal at all times. No big. And, yeah, we should probably combine our powers on this.”

“I’ll be riding your coattails the whole time,” she said with a small grin, and settled his cup in front of him. “Getting you coffee, probably. I dunno if the neural wiring’s up for it anymore, but I’m game to try. At the very least, I can sync with your visuals so I can offer advice and interpret from the sidelines.”

He caught her hand in his own, stroked a thumb over the faint lines of nanoglow still visible beneath her skin. She absolutely did not let her breath catch in her throat or her fingers quiver, no matter how badly they wanted to. “If you haven’t been using your inboard systems much, they probably use a tune-up. I can help with that, too -- I’ve gotten pretty good at fixing my own stuff in the last couple years.”

“Valkyrie cyber-rigging is illegal,” she said softly, closed her fingers around his and somehow tangled them together instead of pulling their hands apart. “And it’s a lot harder to pass off as anything other than what it is. This is the first I’ve used them since the family was dismantled. I couldn’t risk anyone finding out and hauling me in for removal, not with how extensively I’m rigged. Needless to say…” She smiled faintly, because she didn’t want him looking that horrified and hoped the smile would take the edge off. “It’s been awhile since my last adjustment. And since yours, I’ll wager. Don’t think I didn’t notice how tender your spine is, Nathaniel. I’ll want a look at that sooner rather than later.”

“It’s been awhile, yeah. I was seriously considering selling a kidney -- I mean, I’ve got two kidneys and only one nervous system.” A twitch that didn’t quite become a smile. “I suppose I
should cop to seeking off-market treatment before you discover the modding the hard way, huh? Also, lemme get my kit. We’ll get you tuned and then get to work.”

It was impulse that made her lean in, lean down, and press a kiss to his cheek again, near the corner of his mouth. That’s what she kept telling herself. “You are seriously the best, Nate. I promise, as your doctor-- former doctor and current medical advisor--” She had to fight harder than she wanted to in order to keep the warm grin on her face. “-- I will not say a single word about whatever modding I will be required to unfuck, because we do what we need to for survival, and I can’t fault anyone, least of all you, for that.”

“If you can still say that after I’ve stuck needles in your spine and subjected you to a systems diagnostic that’s likely to be a little unpleasant in its duration, you can definitely call yourself my doctor again, Bets.” And now it really was a grin. “Let’s make Jesse glad he called us.”

oOooOoO

For all he hadn’t spent more than a few weeks resident in Green Sky Gardens, it was a bit disquieting how swiftly it had come to feel like home. The sight of its dome through the forward windshield as Lena made her final approach was as soothing as the walls of Shimada Castle had been once upon a time, and something in Genji’s chest unknotted a little.

“We will be landing at Green Sky Gardens Arcology heliport in approximately two minutes. Please return your seat backs to the upright position unless you’re too asleep to hear me,” Lena drawled from the cockpit. “Genji, can you make sure those two don’t go bouncing off the floor when I touch down?”

“I can, and I will.” He took his attention from the shimmering dome and placed it squarely on Jesse, securely wrapped around Hanzo and soundly asleep. He considered his options, swiftly realizing they were in far lesser variety than he’d initially assumed. “On second thought, perhaps I spoke in haste. I sincerely doubt I can get them apart with any speed and decorum. Jesse may attempt to kill me if I try. Perhaps you should try floating like a butterfly?”

The airframe vibrated gently as the landing gear came to rest on the landing pad without a single trace of bounce. “For the record? Joking. I haven’t bounced a VTOL landing since that one time in Mozambique. Can you actually help me get them unloaded?”

“I actually can, and I actually will.” Just for a moment, he was so very very tempted to nudge Jesse awake with a toe in the ribs, and chalked it up to lingeringly phantom antisocial tendencies resurrected by the circumstances. Instead, he crouched beside them and shook Jesse’s shoulder. “Brother, we’re home.”

Jesse’s eyes snapped open, hazed with crimson that swiftly faded as he focused and oriented. “Any trouble?” he rumbled, tightening his grip around Hanzo in preparation to get to his feet.

“None,” Genji replied, standing and offering a helping hand to that process. How they managed it without so much as mildly disturbing his brother, he would never know, but perhaps it spoke to the trials aniki had undergone that his exhaustion ran so deep. “What are your orders from here?”

Jesse smirked wryly, shifting Hanzo gently into an easier position. “Get that nanosludge into whatever secured holdings Green Sky’s got, and get Meilin and Pacemaker to meet us in the infirmary.” He paused and his head tilted. “We got an infirmary, right?”

“Technically, yes!” Lena interjected, as she went about cycling down the engines and engaging in her post-flight checklist. “Got a transmission on the way in -- the Old Men finagled an empty flat
on the next floor up from theirs for short-term rental usage until more permanent arrangements can be made, and the security team went over it with a fine toothed comb, added some enhancements, and facilities set it up with some extra beds.”

“And secured facilities?” Genji inquired, and managed not to shudder too visibly at the thought of being in even protected, prolonged contact with whatever the hell was in that canister. “Or am I going to have to deposit our acquisition with the snoozer on the front gate?”

“Let me bug Meilin and we’ll know in a minute.”

It took closer to fifteen minutes and the arrival of a small group of security personnel to provide an escort but as it happened Green Sky did have a secured vault for resident valuables -- mostly expensive jewelry and artwork remanded for care while they were out of the country for significant lengths of time. The portion of the vault that came with Hanzo’s flat was empty and more than large enough to contain a canister of nanosquirm, at least for the time being.

No one remained on the heliport pad by the time he returned, so he instead returned to the couch on which he’d been crashing -- Hanzo’s kotatsu, more specifically -- in search of a hot shower and clean clothes. What he really wanted to do was go to the infirmary upstairs immediately, but he figured whoever was looking over his brother wouldn’t be amused with being crowded by an overprotective brother as well as an overprotective husband, so he cleaned up instead to give them some time to get situated.

By the time he finally made his way upstairs, hoodied and slouching into shadows out of as much habit as discomfort with other people’s glances, the makeshift infirmary was quiet and calm, so he imagined all the distressed yelling and pacing Jesse had no doubt done was over, one way or the other. He had his hand on the door when a flash of purple hair inside froze his lungs inside what was left of his ribcage.

He’d completely forgotten Jesse’d recalled Beth, and of course she’d be the medic overseeing Hanzo’s care. Except for Angela, there was no one better in the world to do it. And except for Angela, there was no one who’d taken the brunt of his anger and self-admitted dickishness during his Blackwatch years as much as Beth had done.

He took his hand off the door, because he had his hopeful guess how eternally-cheerful and friendly Beth might greet him, but he was pretty sure she’d been in private tears a few times because of him, and in no way did he want to upset or distract her with his presence while she was overseeing the no doubt delicate care of his older brother.

At least, that’s what he told himself as he fled back to Hanzo’s flat like the ghosts of the past were hard on his heels.

\[\text{oOoOoOo}\]

*The ceiling is not as it should be.*

The thought made itself known between one instant and the next, the first coherent thing to crawl out of the formless morass occupying the space behind his eyes. He could not define precisely what was *wrong* about the ceiling, merely that it *was* , and for a time he simply lay still, contemplating, breathing deeply of the cool, unscented air, and that contemplation blossomed outward into wondering where he was and how he had gotten there.

The most coherent of his immediate recollections were a blur of images and sensations -- a surgical suite somewhere, the air thick with the chemical scent of antimicrobial cleaning agents, darkened
hallways, smoke, blood. He felt, distantly, that he should be more alarmed than he was but could not work up the mental or emotional energy necessary to actually become so -- particularly since he was not restrained, and the bed beneath him was far too comfortable to be hospital issue, and the ceiling overhead was the sound-dampening tiles used by Green Sky in every unit in the arcology.

He sighed, relieved, as that knowledge slotted comfortingly into place.

Nearby, someone was snoring softly. A second someone was moving about on soft feet, humming quietly to themself as they went about whatever task they were performing. But only those two. He turned his face in the direction of those soothing workaday sounds and opened his eyes a crack, found the source of the humming: a woman working in front of a fan of holomonitors on the far side of the room, compact of stature, her violently purple hair twisted up in a knot at the base of her skull. Jesse dozed in the corner nearest the sideboard where she worked, head tilted back against the back of a chair far too comfortable to be standard hospital furniture, a blanket tucked around him. A rush of relief washed through him, too strong to hold back, and he released his breath in an entirely too audible sound.

The woman looked up abruptly, blinked once at him, and her face broke into a smile that he couldn’t help but be warmed by. “Good morning, Lieutenant Shimada-McCree,” she said, but quietly, as if to not wake Jesse, and began dismissing holoscreens with broad sweeps of her purple-nanoglowing hands, instead of approaching him as he might have expected her to do. “There’s a knife under your pillow if you want a weapon, sir. I know I’m a stranger to you, and we all tend to react poorly to strangers. I won’t be offended if you prefer to be armed. Promise.”

No smile should be that bright, disarming and impish all at the same time, but hers somehow managed it. He felt himself succumbing to its charms against both his will and his better judgment. “I thank you for that consideration. May I ask your name?”

Slowly, as the last screen vanished from the air, she padded towards him, hands always visible. “I’m Bethany Liu. Beth. Pacemaker. Occasionally ‘medic!’ or ‘hey you with the wings’.” Her smile widened into a tiny grin. “Take your pick, sir.”

“Bethany,” Hanzo replied, rolled his neck a bit and propped himself up on his elbows, “you need not call me ‘sir.’ Or ‘lieutenant.’ Hanzo is more than adequate. We are at Green Sky?”

“We are, sir.” Her eyes sparkled merrily at him. “I know you’re definitely more than adequate, because your snoring honeybear over there is very particular, but as my superior officer, I’m required to show at least the basics of respect, so you can save face when I’m chewing you a new asshole for performing some heroically stupid stunt. Ask Commander Reyes about it. It’s his policy.”

The corners of Hanzo’s mouth twitched uncontrollably for a moment and he allowed a small smile at least to blossom. “Very well, if you must. Is Commander McCree --?”

“Jesse,” she cut in with a wicked grin. “I’ve slapped too many alcohol detox patches on that asshole’s behind to ever think of him as superior.”

The laugh bubbled out of him before he could stop it and before he was finished he was laying back among the pillows again, with his hands over his face attempting to control it. After a moment, he even succeeded. “Is Jesse well?”

“He’s fine,” she said with a smile, and turned away to open the little fridge on the counter nearest his bed, reached in and his attention was drawn to the small of her back as, unexpectedly, her shirt hem rose with the movement and words appeared, black and faded, under an image too briefly
flashed to properly identify: primum, non nocere. “Exhaustion, mostly. He’s been a busy boy this week, I understand. I’m keeping an eye on him for you.”

“Thank you.” Hanzo said softly, as he traced the shadows lying on his husband’s face, the strain around his eyes and across his brow. “I... admit to some concern for his well being, inasmuch as I saw him floating face-down in the pool of our honeymoon rental. Admittedly, he seems to have gotten better.”

“The Reyes-Morrisons are irritatingly capable like that. One minute, a hair from death. Next minute, standing up and shooting back.” She came back with a paper cup that she rattled softly: unmistakably ice chips. “I’m more concerned about you at the moment, honestly. You’ve got an awful lot of nasty shit floating around in just about every system you own, sir. Thirsty?”

“Yes.” He was slightly amazed that his throat hadn’t cracked into dusty fragments already. “I was heavily sedated for what I assume was a considerable length of time, and perhaps chemically restrained in other ways. I confess that I resorted to combat stimulants in order to overcome the remaining effects.”

“Say ten Hail Marys and an Our Father and you’ll be forgiven.” Her hand flicked, glowed, and a screen popped up between them. “I’ve only done cursory non-invasive scans and procedures, sir, but between your heart rate, blood pressure and respiration while unconscious, I can make a few educated guesses about your pre-combat stim drug loads. I wanted your permission before I did more thorough exams, blood work, deeper scans, that sort of thing.”

Hanzo took a mouthful of chips and allowed them to melt their cold and soothing way down his throat before he responded. “You have my permission. I know that I was subjected to a laparoscopic extraction procedure of some kind.”

Bethany’s face did the sort of complicated shifting dance where her expression did not change a single millimeter, but it was suddenly full of fury and indignance, on his behalf clearly, instead of friendliness and cheer. “I should probably let you know I fully intend to shoot the ones responsible for your condition, sir.”

“Thank you. I suspect a line may be forming.” The corners of his mouth twitched, and his eyes burned, and he took another mouthful of ice until both urges went away.

“I’m a combat medic, lieutenant,” she said, and her hand laid on his shoulder was as gentle as her voice. “My chances of getting there first are better than you think. Let’s see what we’re dealing with, shall we?”

“By all means.” He set the cup aside, the best to assist her in any way he could.

By the time Bethany called an end to the seemingly endless tests, he had been poked and prodded in nearly every undignified way possible, but in such a way that it didn’t quite feel like indignity. Rather, it felt unwontedly comforting, a perfectly astonishing sensation given the circumstances. He credited Bethany’s entire bedside manner, her instructions and explanations that did not patronize, the care in her hands and the calm timbre of her voice, the occasional snarky aside or anecdote concerning the medical peccadilloes of Blackwatch agents past, Jesse notwithstanding.

By the time she shuffled a sleepy-eyed Jesse out of the flat and locked the door behind him, her smile had definitely changed into something approaching grim compassion. She tucked the sheet up around his hips, fluffed his pillows, and took her time fetching both a pair of transdermal patches and several small boxes of low-acid apple juice, the kind with the straw attached to the side. “So,” she said after a deep breath, settling on the edge of the bed beside his knees. “These will
clear the two more dangerous drugs out of your system in a couple hours. Give the patches about
fifteen minutes to start kicking in, and you can take liquids, hence the juice boxes.”

“And the rest?” Hanzo asked dryly.

Her hand slid over his, and her eyes softened at the corners, shimmied a little. “You were right
about the laparoscopic procedure, sir,” she said quietly. “That’s why your testicles hurt.”

He allowed his eyes to slide closed and nodded slightly. “I… suspected as much. My captors had
the sort of cold storage containers used by reproductive technologies in their possession.”

“I’ve seen a lot of unethical procedures in my time.” Her hands closed, gentle but firm, cradling his
between both of hers. “It’s okay to have feelings about it.” She glanced over her shoulder at the
closed door, and turned back to him. “And you are completely assured of my discretion, sir.
Despite the loss of my license, I hold to patient confidentiality. Your secrets are safe with me.”

“I…” Hanzo began and stopped, as his voice wavered and his eyes stung; it took him a long
moment to discipline both. “I suspect that usable unmodified samples of my genetic material were a
requirement in this instance because my mother ardently desires grandchildren of her own blood.”

“That came out almost evenly. ‘She is aware that Genji is alive. He should be warned.’

“He will be,” she said soothingly, and one hand slid up his arms to gently, comfortingly, rub his
bicep. “That’s not something you need to worry about right now, though, sir. Right now, the only
decision you need to make is whether we purge your system of its unwanteds in a very queasy,
highly uncomfortable couple of hours, or gradually over a very comfortable couple of days.”

“Hours,” he replied, and forced his hand to release what could not have been a comfortable grip on
hers. “I have been useless entirely too long.”

“Take the days, sir,” she said with a smile that somehow reminded him of an implacable mountain,
and took his hand again, warmly. “You’re off for a week, minimum, anyway. No arguments either.
This is one of those instances when I outrank you. Blame Commander Reyes. That’s also his
policy.”

Hanzo opened his mouth to argue, reassessed the situation while the words were still forming, and
muttered, “I intend to. At length.”

“Be nice,” she said, and picked up the first of the two patches, peeling off the protective back and
sliding the sleeve of his dressing gown up his arm to place it. “I’ve got so many non-medical
embarrassing stories about your husband and your brother, but I’ll only tell you if you behave.”

“As you wish.” The smallest of smiles twitched at the corner of his mouth. “I believe I may have a
few to exchange, as well.”

oOoOoOo

Once removed from the infirmary by Beth’s gentle but firm ousting, Jesse knew better than to try
and wheedle his way back in, no matter how much in particular he wanted to. Even though he was
barely awake as Beth shoved him through the door and barely understood what was going on until
the door was shut and locked behind him, Jesse’s survival instinct where the Valkyrie medics was
concerned had been deeply ingrained by years of working with Angela and Beth and Neil and
Riley and the others.

Valkyrie medics had absolutely no compunctions about shooting one somewhere extremely painful
but incredibly superficial if one got in the way of treating someone they considered more critically
in need of their attention. He had absolutely zero intention of testing Beth’s resolve this early in their renewed relationship.

Instead, he made his way to the Shimada-McCree flat with some vague notion of finding something to fill his growling, protesting stomach, and found Genji or Lena -- but probably Genji, since whoever it was had cleaned up after themselves, with dishes neatly drying in the rack on the counter, and Lena was notorious for “forgetting” that part of the chore wheel -- had cooked a massive amount of scrambled eggs-and-veg, home fries, and bacon.

The leftovers did not last long against his prodigious hunger, and he washed it all down with the last of the sun tea in the pitcher on the top shelf of the fridge. Thus sated, his stomach subsided with its demands, and he was free to get back to worrying about his husband and his arcology.

He glanced at the clock, judged how long Beth was likely to be busy with Hanzo and made a face when his calculations resulted in him getting shot if he went back this soon. Instead, he keyed up communications and asked Alecto pretty-please to let him know where Nate was at the moment, and when he knew, mosied that direction to check in with his de facto Chief of Analysis on how that analysis was coming.

Nate and Beth were presently slotted in together in a flat across the core but on the same floor as theirs, on the outer ring, and so it had a spectacular view of the city from the floor-to-ceiling windows in the main sitting room, a view Nate had closed off behind privacy screens because of course he did. He was also sitting dead center in the middle of the floor, back braced against a zaisu and at least three layers of cushions, cross-legged and surrounded in a multilayered fan of holoscreens, the ice-blue glow of cybernetic control surfaces shining under the skin of his hands and forearms, in his eyes.

“Hey Jesse.” His voice came out of the speakers attached to the entertainment suite, not his lips, because he’d always been a freaky little show-off that way. “How goes?”

“Kicked out of Medical,” he said, hooking his hand under the back of a dining chair and reversing it to sit so he could lean over the back to face Nate. “In fear of my safety if I go back before Beth is ready to let me in. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, yeah I do.” He laughed out loud, his own slightly raspy voice following. “I’m filtering the noise out of the information you sent me right now. An absolute fuckton of communication comes into and out of this building on a day to day basis.”

“I imagine it does. Green Sky’s somethin’ of a city to itself.” He shrugged, grinned a little. “You managed in Geneva. You’ll manage in Hong Kong.”

“You absolutely sure it came from inside? Alecto told me that the lieutenant, at one point, got made when he went walkabout and whacked a pack of bounty hunters who’d gotten wind of your presence in this fair principality.” He flicked a screen over to Jesse with his eyes alone.

“Alecto says that because Hanzo says that,” Jesse said wryly, leaned his chin on his folded hands and skimmed the screen. “I know about that trip, but he traveled under someone else. Ishinomori Kira wasn’t compromised, an’ Alecto can verify that too.” He considered, scratched his nose as he did so. “Much as I hate to say it, Icebreaker, limit your search t’friends and family. People with access to us. Someone knew too much about our travel plans an’ housing arrangements. That list is far shorter than ‘everyone in Green Sky’.”

“That does help quite a bit, boss, thank you.” A handful of screens blinked out, and then a handful more. “Going from the point when you got back from Canada -- won’t take me too long, even if
I’m not using my whole brain.” He stretched, winced, unfolded himself into a basically standing position. “Want something to drink? And how are you doing? I don’t mind saying that you’re putting off some…” He gestured elaborately, “...some serious fuckin’ vibes right now.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Vibes? And hell, coffee’d be great. I know without havin’ to look that the Tsujimura-Liu household, is definitely one with quality coffee. Or is it Liu-Tsujimura? Inquirin’ minds wanna know.”

Nate poured mugs for them both, adulterated Jesse’s to his known preferences. “I’m probably just going to take her name. Have you ever tried pronouncing Tsujimura when you’re drunk? I’m surprised I haven’t bitten my own tongue off yet.” He sipped. “And yes, ‘vibes.’ More than your arm and control cybernetics ever put out on their own.”

Jesse smirked, reached out to Charon, and let Charon answer in his voice through the speakers, a line from an old classic movie he knew for damned sure Nate had seen: “You’re not the only one with gifts.”

Nate’s eyebrows migrated in the direction of his hairline. “Fuck me gently with a chainsaw. I absolutely did not see that coming.”

“Honestly, neither did I,” he said, gratefully taking the cup as it was held out to him. “But I didn’t die from it, so fuck it.”

“I’m just fuckin’ with ya, Icebreaker,” Charon said from the speakers, just different enough now to be noticeable as another person and highly fucking amused. “Been lookin’ forward to meetin’ you. I’m Charon.”

“Man, when you decide to say ‘fuck it, fuck it all’ to the powers of law and order you really don’t screw around.” Nate grinned. “An Avatar and reconstituting our banned-by-order-of-the-UN black ops crew and unless I seriously miss my guess we’re going to finish unfinished business with the Shimada-gumi, too.”

“Ain’t like the UN’s ever done me any favors,” Jesse replied with a grin. “And Hanzo’s family ain’t the Shimada-gumi so fuck them too. Out of curiosity, because I know damned well Hanzo’s gonna need a pet project to keep himself from climbin’ the walls while Beth keeps him on mandatory leave, when’re you thinkin’ the wedding’s gonna be?”

“That was a joke. I was joking. Honestly, all you sickeningly happy middle-aged married people.” Nate shook his head. “Besides, she’s not into me that way. Genji maybe and, by the way, I was promised a story about an Omnic boyfriend and also when, exactly, did he stop being a borderline psychotic cybergoth? Not that I’m complaining, because he seems significantly less likely to snap and kill us all in our sleep now.”

Jesse’s turn to let his eyebrows crawl into his hairline. “I wasn’t aware you were fuckin’ blind, Breaker. Beth’s always looked at you like you hung the moon just for her, no matter how many times Genji turned her head.” He shook his own head. “As for Genji? Hell if I know. Sometime during his stay at the Shambali Monastery in Nepal, I wager. That’s where he met Zenyatta, the aforementioned Omnic boyfriend that may or may not actually be his boyfriend. We’re not ‘zactly sure on the specifics, and Hanzo’s too Japanese to ask.”

“You’re going to make me ask, aren’t you?” Nate grinned. “S’okay, I’ll channel all of my Canadianness into it and it’ll come out sounding polite.”

“As long as I don’t get another panicked page to come untie you,” he said, and drained the rest of
his coffee to hide the smirk. “I saw too much that night, and not all of it could be drowned by whiskey.”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t want to hear it, Mr. I Use Pudding Cups For Purposes Man Never --” Nate’s eyes flickered, a pulse ran through his interface surfaces, and he set down his coffee cup. “I think I got your hits, boss. Two, same frequency, same location, high-information-density pulses that went out disguised as regular internet traffic.” His fingers twitched, sent the appropriate screen for Jesse to peruse. “One the day you came back from your sojourn abroad and one the day you left for France. Wait. Three others, during the course, spaced a couple weeks apart. Whoever built the communications rig knew what they were doing.”

“D’you need a new name?” he murmured, still smirking into his cup. “Or have you got this?”


“I meant your callsign, not your…” Jesse froze, brain, body, everything, because he could not mean… “Like a lil sister. Why?”

“Because the pulse transmissions came from a flat tagged with her identity code.”

Jesse stood up so fast the chair fell with authority to the floor. “Show me.”
His first official war council as Commander of Blackwatch 2.0, complete with official titles and ranks and everything, and Jesse wished he could be anywhere but here. Out of all the people he’d ever even idly considered the source of their information leak, Meilin hadn’t even been on the list, let alone anywhere near the top.

*Perfect cover for a hostile operative,* Charon mused in the privacy of their shared headspace. *The best sleeper agent is the one you never suspect is a sleeper agent.*

Jesse’s eyebrows crawled into his hairline and he covered his utter surprise by taking a fortifying gulp of his coffee. …*you actually think Meilin is the source of the leak?*

*Hell no,* Charon replied without hesitation, and added a derisive snort for good measure. *That girl worships the ground our dearest darlin’ walks on. No way she’s betraying him. I’m just sayin’ that the one you would never in a million years think is betraying you is the perfect cover. Or a perfect scapegoat.*

The thought had occurred to him too, along with many other more disturbing thoughts he didn’t care to think of at this exact moment in time. He busied himself with preparing coffee the way he recalled everyone liked it and opened the boxes of pastries he’d picked up from the place on the next tier down that Hanzo favoured.

*You have officially become Gabriel Reyes 2.0,* Charon observed with a grin Jesse could feel straight down to his toenails. *I’ll make a note for Hanzo to get you a frilly Kiss the Commander apron for your anniversary.*

*Thank you kindly and please go fuck yourself,* Jesse replied pleasantly, to Charon’s fondly mocking chortle.

The door opened before Charon could gather himself for a rejoinder, and Beth shuffled in, tired-eyed and finger-combing through her hair, elastic tie on her wrist. She angled her approach for the table with the coffee and practically inhaled the cup Jesse thoughtfully held out for her.

“Rough night?” he asked, taking the empty back and making her another cup as she finished retying her ponytail.

She nodded and considered the donuts, selecting the only apple danish in the box. “Yeah,” she mumbled around her first mouthful and took the second cup Jesse held out for her, then swallowed. “The lieutenant will not be joining us. He had a bad reaction to one of the purgatives and was up all night in a pretty miserable state. He’s sleeping now, and he needs it, so I overruled your orders. It’s nice to be de facto Chief of Medical.”

Jesse nodded, squashed the anxious spike of concern that stabbed into his heart at Beth’s words, and reminded himself that Hanzo was in the very best of care under Beth’s watch. “You didn’t
“leave him alone, did you?”

Beth bit into her danish again, and the look she shot him over the pastry could only be described as *testicle-withering*. “Tekhartha Zenyatta expressed a desire to, and I quote, ‘develop a salient holistic whole-being approach to providing effective therapy to those I believe are in most desperate need of it’, so I left him sitting with the lieutenant while he communes with Psyche, who I dug out of the Archive and asked to be Medical’s AI, by the way, and probably memorizes all my textbooks.”

A grin rose unbidden, and Jesse let it stay. “Why does that sound like mandatory psychological counseling is in all our futures, Beth?”

“Dunno, Jess,” she said through a sharp-toothed grin. “But I’m tempted to make him my 2IC, so that might in fact become a thing. If ever there was a group that badly, badly needed it, we--” And her hand circled wide and broad as the door opened to admit Genji and Lena and Nate. “--are definitely it.”

“Well,” he said wryly, and started handing cups of coffee out as the others came to poke through the pastries, “you’re not wrong about that.”

“What’s that?” Lena asked, with a sharp suspicious glance up from the donuts. “Wrong about what, luv?”

“Nothin’,” he assured her, fruitlessly so, given the lack of assuagement he gauged in her levels of skepticism. “Really, it’s nothin’.”

“Uh huh,” she said, thoroughly unconvinced, and maneuvered to a seat with her donut between her teeth, gesturing back and forth between her eyes and Jesse with the first two fingers of her free hand.

He rolled his eyes, offered her a two-fingered salute of his own and grabbed the last honey cruller before Genji could swipe it. “Not fast enough,” he said with a smirk, and managed to take a bite before it was suddenly gone.

“Just fast enough,” Genji said before cramming the rest of it into his mouth and smirking triumphantly at Jesse with his cheeks bulging like a chipmunk’s as he chewed.

“I think I’m having a post-traumatic flashback to the Blackwatch commissary in Geneva.” Nate added his third danish to a plate already overflowing with an objectively toxic sugar high and found a chair to eat them all in. “Remember McSandwich mornings? Blood on the floor before noon.”

“Thank you for reminding them that used to be a thing, Nathaniel,” Beth said with a dire glint in her eye as she finished her apple danish and leaned in to swipe one off Nate’s plate. “For note, I will not be providing medical assistance in any current or future case of dumbassery. I’m not Mercy, and I don’t fear you like I feared Gabe, Jess.”

“No respect,” Jesse sighed mournfully, and settled in the executive chair he’d finagled from the public business center for himself. “We got business to take care of, folks. Nate? Wanna fill ‘em in?”

Nate finished his mouthful in two frantic chews, and pulled up a fan of holoscreens to display his data. “Long story short, I found a densely encrypted high information capacity communication line embedded in the arcology’s workaday traffic, which in all likelihood belongs to the rotter who leaked Jess and the Lieutenant’s location to Talon. That’s the good news. The bad news? Its
physical locality appears to be in the flat belonging to Hwong Meilin.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Lena leaned forward to blink owlishly at Nate. “Meilin? No way.”

“You have no idea how much I wish I were kidding because this feels objectively like I just dropped a kitten into boiling oil in front of a roomful of orphans. But, no, no joke, not a dream issue.” He pulled up the specific isolated signal and its identity codes, their place in the arcology map. “I even had Alecto check my math.”

Genji squinted at the feeds displayed, and Jesse tilted his head because he knew that look. “Are these live transmissions, or pre-recorded, Nate?” he asked, and highlighted a particular time for emphasis. “This one here, for instance. Is there any way to tell?”

“Not without examining the device itself, no. Unfortunately.” Nate shook his head. “Which, as you know, means only one thing.”

“I can vouch for Meilin’s whereabouts during this one,” Genji said, then nudged it Jesse’s way. It took him a minute, but then he understood. “That was the night before our wedding.”

“Yes,” Genji said, and sat back in his chair to sip his coffee. “Meilin was present at the spa before I arrived, and I judge us to have been into the third episode of Once Upon A Time On A Battlefield when this particular transmission was time coded. She was present for all six episodes, in my sight at all times.”

“Which argues that the transmission was recorded, delayed, or there’s someone else making them entirely.” Nate fiddled a bit with the feeds, pulled up all the transmissions. “Anybody else see potentially exculpatory discrepancies?”

“I hate to bring it up,” Lena said reluctantly, “but Meilin has a partner.” She cleared her throat and Jesse decided he really didn’t need to know why her face was so flushed and she was avoiding everyone’s eyes. “Lian’s been in a relationship with Meilin for the last ten years. She’s one of us, but I notice she isn’t at this little gathering, and well… We all know it was an inside job back then. I’m not saying... I don’t want to suggest...”

“But we gotta,” Jesse finished gently for her, when it was clear she was having too much trouble getting the words out. “So, suggestions?”

“Do Meilin and Lian live together?” Nate asked. “And is there anyone else in the flat all the time?”

“She has a grandfather,” Jesse said after some thought. “Old Man Jiao. No one likes him much, because he’s a cantankerous old bastard that likes to yell. Hanzo makes Meilin muscle rub for his aches. Lian has her own flat across the ring. Honest to Hades—” And didn’t that just sound fuckin’ surreal now? “—I had no earthly notion Meilin was in a relationship.”

“Sounds to me like she has a reason to keep it quiet,” Genji said, and Lena nodded in agreement, but didn’t add anything further.

Jesse sighed, dragged a hand down his face. “I don’t wanna believe it’s Meilin. She adores Hanzo, and he adores her.”

“Then we’d better make sure we can rule her out,” Nate interjected. “Who wants to steal some maintenance unit coveralls?”

“I’ll do it,” Beth said with a wry smile and set her empty coffee cup down. “One of my assigned
storage rooms so happens to have been a maintenance locker.” She paused, tilted her head in consideration. “Unless it’s not as much fun to have the key. In that case, I nominate Genji as the literal ninja in the room.”

“I vote that our only fully functional medic not go alone into a situation in which she might be shot, and not only because I haven’t been recertified in first aid any time in the last five years,” Nate added and promptly occupied his mouth with another pastry in a doomed, desperate effort at looking casual.

“Love you too, snickerdoodle,” Beth said, sotto voce. “And thanks for reminding me you need a crash course in field medicine for your recerts. We’ll do that this afternoon.”

Jesse shook his head, wondering if Gabe had ever had to deal with this much shenaniganry during his tenure as Command. “Genji, this falls within your skill set, so do the thing and try not to break anything in the process.”

“No promises,” he said, with a too-cheerful smile, and Jesse wondered if it was too early to put in for retirement.

oOoOoOo

His mouth tasted as though something small and exceptionally hairy had, at some point after he finally fell asleep, crawled inside, rubbed itself with single-minded intensity of purpose all over the inside of his cheeks, possibly relieved itself, and then crawled back out again. His teeth felt furry.

His tongue was coated in something so vile it didn’t bear close examination. And when he opened his eyes, the dim, indirect lighting speared them without mercy. He groaned aloud and flung his arm across them, reaching blindly for the squeeze bottle of water to be found on the bedside stand with his free hand.

The bed beside him shifted in a familiar way, and warm breath ghosted along his shoulder and throat as Jesse reached across and nudged the bottle into his questing hand. “Easy, darlin’,” he said, soft and soothing. “S’right here.”

“Jesse?” Hanzo croaked, and lifted his arm enough to see.

“Were you maybe expectin’ someone else, husband?” The flash of a grin could be no one else’s, even before he saw those warm brown eyes smiling down at him. “Head hurt?”

“No as much as it did last night.” He brought the water to his lips -- either still cold or freshly chilled -- and gulped down three swallows, grimacing slightly. “And, for the record, no I was not. I did expect that you might be somewhat preoccupied.”

“Never so much I wouldn’t find time for you, sweetheart.” Jesse’s lips touched his forehead, warm and soft, and then a blessedly cool, damp cloth settled over the spot he’d kissed. “Beth said you had a rough go of it last night.”

“Nnngh. That feels so… good.” He rolled into his husband’s solid warmth, nestled his head beneath his chin. “Yes. Some sort of reaction to the medication. I could keep nothing down. I am afraid I kept Bethany up all night.”

“She may not be SEP, darlin’, but that woman can go for days on nothin’ more than caffeine, stubbornness, and sheer attitude.” Jesse’s arms curled around him, cradled him gently, fingers finding knots of tension in his back and softly beginning to smooth them away. “I think she likes you.”
He could not restrain the quiet sound of relief that left him, nor the soft chuckle. “The gods alone know why. I have been a trial to her since we met.”

He could feel Jesse’s grin curve against his hairline. “She probably appreciates the lack of arguing. You’re doin’ what you’re told, and that has to be a novelty for her to get so easily.”

“I will issue a memorandum mandating no arguments with our only medic, as soon as I can reliably use my fingers,” Hanzo murmured.

“Aww,” his husband crooned as his fingers spiderwalked up his spine, “you like her too.”

“She is wonderfully professional,” he replied as serenely as he could manage. “And also amazingly kind. We are fortunate to have her.” He nestled a fraction closer. “Has she spoken to you?”

“That depends on what you think she might have spoken about,” Jesse replied. “Her longstanding pining for Nate? No. Restoring her credentials? No. Anything specific to do with your medical care? No.” A pause. “You know what, darlin’? Just assume the answer is no and carry on.”

“It was unworthy of her to ask that. My apologies.” He closed his eyes, gathered his thoughts, breathed in as much peace as he could. “Have you begun analyzing the data we recovered yet?”

“Nate’s workin’ on it,” Jesse said in reply, and he felt lips press against his temple. “Have you met Nate yet?”

“He brought Bethany a late dinner last night and stayed until she ate it.” Hanzo felt a semi-involuntary smile pulling at the corners of his mouth and allowed it to stay. “I think I will like him.”

“If you’d care to put money into the bettin’ pool as to when they’ll actually go out for dinner together as a semi-functional couple, Lena’s keeping that book.” Another kiss, this one slightly lower, towards the corner of his eye instead of his temple. “Is something wrong, darlin’? Is there somethin’ I should be worrying about?”

And suddenly there were no more questions to dodge behind, or places where he might hide in them. “I cannot imagine a circumstance in which you do not know that the Shimada-gumi was responsible for my abduction and your --” He felt the waver trying to work its way into his voice, stopped speaking until he was certain he could control it.

“My near-death experience?” Jesse’s voice was remarkably light and casual, his hands gentle and soothing against his back. “Yes, darlin’. I know who was responsible for it, and for you.”

“My mother was present at Blacksite Tirispol.” His eyes stung, and he rested his face against Jesse’s shoulder. “To collect her payment for delivering me to Talon.”

Jesse’s arms curled around him, a broad, warm palm smoothing up and down his back, slipping under the hem of his sleep shirt to maximize skin contact, and his lips touched Hanzo’s forehead again. “That woman just keeps creepin’ further and further up my list,” he murmured.

“Her payment,” Hanzo continued, soft and dry, “was in blood and flesh, not currency.”

He knew the moment Jesse went from incomprehension to dawning, horrified knowing. Felt it in the stiffening of his arms, heard it in the sharp inhale of his breath, the shock reverberating in his chest and limbs. “Oh,” Jesse said, soft and something approaching tentative, and his hands stilled on Hanzo’s back. “Oh, sweetheart.”
An appallingly powerful desire to curl around his husband and weep hysterically washed through him and he only barely managed to control it. “She made no secret of the fact that she required me to provide our family heirs, no matter how I might feel otherwise.” His own voice sounded unnaturally calm in his ears. “I suppose I should have expected that she would one day find a way to achieve that with or without my willing participation.”

Jesse was still and silent for a long moment, and then drew back from him, just far enough to cradle his face between his palms, look into his eyes with the sort of utter serenity he associated with the faces of men at complete peace with their gods and ancestors, assured of the fundamental truths of the universe. “My dearest darlin’,” he said, and there was something of an echo underscoring his words. “If you so wish it, she won’t have the raisin’ of any child of ours. I promise.”

“I,” Hanzo replied softly and he could no longer prevent his voice from cracking, “would never wish that.”

“Then it ain’t gonna happen.” Jesse’s head shifted to kiss him, gently, ever so gently, and lightly. Lovingly. “We’re not gonna let her.”

Hanzo buried his face in Jesse’s shoulder and permitted the storm of emotions churning inside him, building since the moment he woke immobile and helpless in Tirispol, to break.

oOoOoOo

Getting the signal transmitter was, to his utter disappointment, entirely anticlimactic, but he’d gone through the trouble of stealing two pairs of maintenance coveralls, and he was a professional, so he wasn’t about to let his disappointment show. Not the least because Nate was fidgety enough for both of them, and by the laws of the universe, Genji had to be the cool and collected one.

He was sure that somewhere, Hanzo was laughing his ass off at that thought.

“Well, in theory I could,” Nate replied, in the slightly officious tone of a very junior supervisor correcting a slacker underling. “But in practice this gives us a chance to snoop and drop some technology that will enable further snooping. Which are things I cannot do from my couch.”

“Let me rephrase: why could I not do my part from your couch?” He grinned down at the upturned look, giving Nate his best winsome smile. “After all, I do my best work when I’m flat on my back.”

“You,” Nate replied from behind the relative safety of his tablet, “are a fucking reprobate, Genji Shimada, and you will not make me break character so stop trying.” The rather distinct sound of peace-stress breathing. “You’re the muscle here. I’m just a pale computer larva.”

“I thought being a reprobate was one of my better qualities.” Bored with pretending to stare raptly at whatever Nate was doing with the screens, he wandered over from the comm terminal to the living room, eyes darting around automatically to scan for devices, as well as spots devices could go were they in the market for better eyes on the Hwong residence. “How much longer?”

“Five minutes.” Nate rose, made a quick pass through the flat of his own. “Okay, I’ve got what I need.”

He drifted near the armchair in the corner, clearly bearing signs of a frequent inhabiter, both in the
ass print worn into the leather seat, and the myriad of burn scars and scratches on the worn arms. His lip curled at the faint scent of cloves hanging in the air around it; he’d never liked clove-smokers. “Do we have a verdict yet?”

“You’re practically standing on top of it,” Nate replied, dryly. “Look in the chair?”

“There’s no one there.” Gingerly, he peeled off the arm covers, plucked the cushion off with a delicate grasp. “What am I looking for, Nathaniel?”

“Lemme see… it might be small. Like, super-tiny.” Nate joined him, feeling carefully around in the chair’s innards between the seat and the sides. “Or something easily mistakable for something else.” A face. “Ugh, that smell.”

“I’ve kicked people out of my bed for smoking cloves,” he admitted, and pulled a face of his own. “Though this brand seems to be especially noxious.” Deep in the inside of the chair, his fingers brushed something and he seized it to drag it out before he could knock it deeper. “What’s this? Smoke filter. Clearly it’s not working properly.” He glanced at Nate, glanced back at it, then offered it over. “Think this is enough to clear Meilin?”

“Well,” Nate grinned up at him, “well, well, well. What a lovely little bit of stealth comms technology. And,” He checked his tablet, industriously running whatever that let Nate peer inside such things, “I do believe we have a comprehensive signal match. We’d better put this back where we found it before Jiao wakes up from his afternoon nap and go tell the boss his newly adopted kid sister didn’t sell him out.”

More relief than Genji thought he would experience flooded through him, threatening to weaken his knees, and he closed his eyes to send a private word of thanks to the dragons, even though he was fairly sure the Shimada kami had little to no doings with this turn of events. “Good,” he said, when he was sure the tremor in his voice wouldn’t manifest. “I would not have liked to think that we were all such terrible judges of character.”

“But, don’t take this the wrong way, Genji, but I am totally not walking into that particular minefield on like my second day on the job.” Nate smiled wryly. “But I will say, all things being equal, I don’t think you two are doing badly on the whole reconciliation front? I mean, the Lieutenant was really worried about you when I saw him last night.” A pause. “I totally walked into the minefield. Fuck.”

Genji laughed as he stepped out of the coveralls, balled them up and shoved them behind a stack of replacement screens for the air filtration systems. “You are adorable when you’re awkward. I keep meaning to see Hanzo, but… things happen and I become distracted.”

“You might want to set yourself a reminder attached to some unpleasant and unignorable physiological sensation. I can do that, if you want.” Lightly, as he deposited his own coverall in the bottom of a storage locker. “But, seriously. I was kinda delirious there for a little and he couldn’t
decide who he wanted more, you or Jesse.”

“I do not wish to upset Beth,” he finally said, after wrestling with the desire to never confess a thing again in his life. “We did not leave things particularly well.”

“... Okay, I can understand that.” Nate admitted, ungrudgingly, after a moment. “That might be awkward -- but Beth’s a pro, and so are you, so I’m going to stand by my suggestion. Also: you two should, like, talk since we’re all going to be working together again. If only to clear the air.”

“Are you planning on taking your own advice?” He was surprised at how little sarcasm came out, because he usually intended none and got a lot. “How long have you been thinking about asking her for coffee and not done it?”

“Beth and I have a perfectly functional relationship where we don’t allow each other to lapse into altered mental states from lack of caffeine and proper calorie intake as it stands,” Nate replied evenly, opened the access door, and peered out. “Also, she’s not into me like that.”

“I notice that a) you are still quite cheerfully delusional and b) never actually answered my question.” He scrubbed his face with both hands. “I’ll talk to her when you will.”

“Genji, we live together. I don’t have to ask her to coffee, I just have to make it.” Nate replied, exasperated, and stepped out into the hall. “And I’m not delusional. I just know how to assess the odds.”

“So do I.” He sighed, faint and nudged past Nate into the hallway himself. “No upsetting the medic when my beloved brother is under her care.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t push.” A sidelong glance. “You’re not a bad brother, Genji. You helped your brother find his way here, to our family, and then you helped bring the family back together. That sort of argues in favor of a lot of good things.”

“I actually had very little to do with all of that.” Wryly. “All I did was arrange for Jesse and Hanzo to meet and hopefully not let each other die. The rest, they both did together.”

“Nothing you said contradicted anything I said.” A wry smile. “So... wanna go for coffee before we head back to the office?”

“Is this the kind of coffee where we end up chatting about old times and catching up on current events, or the kind of coffee that results in another session of ropes and knots?” An even wryer smile. “I’d love coffee, Nate. Should we see if Beth is available?”

“Why not?” Nate shook his head and dialed her number.
Hanzo slept, more peacefully than he had in days, the last remnants of restraint chemicals fading from his body and the body itself recovering from stress and injury in accordance with expected physiological norms. It was, even through the insulating remove of medical monitoring technology, an amazing thing to watch, the complex interplay of flesh and blood and breath, neurology and chemical balances, and Tekhartha Zenyatta found the natural process of healing endlessly fascinating. A part of his mind followed the process in close linkage with the monitors at Dr. Liu’s direction, making adjustments to the systems feeding hydration and nutrition and analgesia through intravenous lines at her request -- not much analgesia, any longer, as most of the physical injuries had responded properly to biotic infusion, and gradually decreasing amounts everything else, as he spent more and more time awake and capable of feeding himself. At the moment, his EKG suggested deep, palliative but completely normal rest was finally occurring.

“You keep this up, and I’m going to have to press-gang you into Medical,” Dr. Liu said, pausing in the doorway with a fresh cup of coffee, perhaps medically inadvisable, given her sleep deprivation, but pragmatically necessary given the list of tasks and meetings still ahead in her day.

“That would not be necessary,” Zenyatta assured her, firmly repressing the urge to open a screen containing literature on the effects of excess caffeine consumption on the human body. “Or, to be more precise, you would not need to compel my interest in such a course. During my travels, I have spent a considerable quantity of time rendering medical assistance to others and I would be pleased to continue doing so now that I have come to rest.”

She smiled and sipped her coffee, then placed it on the counter and swept her hair up and back into the ponytail he had become accustomed to seeing. “Is that what you call it, coming to rest? I like that. It’s almost lyrical.”

“I do. It seems...most appropriate, given the nature of my existence.” He silently sent his spheres gently into motion, rotating around his shoulders. “Rootless, have I wandered, until a place green enough to hold me came into view. I am not so different from many here in that way, it seems.” One of those spheres spun away and took up station at Bethany’s shoulder, feeding back an assortment of sensor readings, more than mere data, somewhat less than the information that could be gleaned from touch -- and not the first time it had done so.

Bethany reached up to brush the orb with her fingers, turning to spare it a soft smile. “This one follows me around when you’re here,” she said, patting the orb lightly. “I think it’s adopted me.”

“They have their favorites.” Not for the first time, Zenyatta wished his faceplate were slightly more mobile in its configuration. “I suspect it believes you should be resting more yourself -- you are, physiologically speaking, quite tense. I can assist you, if you wish?”

She blinked, looked quizzical, and then her face broke into a slight smile, that hand that had been patting the orb went to the back of her neck. “It would be correct, but sleep is a privilege not often
afforded to healers,” she said wryly. “And you would be correct in that I’m quite tense. I carry all my stress in my shoulders and neck. I’d love assistance, if only to avoid the tension headache looming in my immediate future.”

“Of course.” The sphere chimed in a manner that could only be described as smug as it took up station above them both, circling its siblings as he dismissed them to keep watch over the lieutenant’s bed. “I believe there is a suitable place to rest in the next room?”

Bethany nodded, grimaced rather involuntarily as the movement clearly pulled something that was not happy to be pulled, and checked Hanzo’s vitals with a perfunctory wave of her right hand and a gleam of nanoglow from her palm. “He should sleep for a little while yet. Psyche, please monitor and let me know if he starts rousing.”

*Of course, Dr. Liu,* Psyche replied serenely through the communications feed.

The awareness of Bethany’s cybernetics shimmered in Zenyatta’s consciousness, a more vivid sense of her being than the raw data of medical monitoring feeds or even verbal communication, and he wondered, briefly, if she was aware of that, of how much of herself she showed to those who could see in the ways that he did. He suspected not -- most humans, even cybernetically augmented humans, did not fully or consciously comprehend how those parts of themselves were perceived by Omnic senses, by machine intelligence in general, and most of the machine intelligences of his acquaintance were loath to share their insights. Relations between humans and Omnics were not, as a generality, the sort that allowed such an open and honest exchange of truths, not without potentially triggering hostile outcomes -- Genji had, on their own first meeting, been unambiguously hostile in response to his unguarded, astonished reaction to meeting a human who felt so much like a machine. He suspected that Bethany might not share that hostility, but it was too early yet to guess and he did not wish to risk making her uncomfortable.

Woolgathering at rest? Bethany asked, light and teasing, and it took him a moment to realize she had not spoken aloud. She paused at the door between this room and the next, and glanced back at him. “Coming?”

*Lead the way, Doctor.* He permitted his faintly chagrined sense of amusement and the impression of a wry smile to flow through the link between them and floated in her wake.

She padded into the spare bedroom of the repurposed flat, shrugging out of her white coat and folding it over the back of a chair. “How do you want me?” she asked as she bent to untie her shoes and toe them over her heels.

Zenyatta took a moment to adjust the height of the unoccupied hoverbed, disconnecting the peripherals and making certain they were stowed carefully out of the way. “On your stomach, if that would be comfortable. Otherwise, one of the chairs will be adequate.”

“Bed’s fine,” she replied, twisting her hair up into a bun and securing it with a stylus before pulling her shirt and undergarment over her head and folding them over her coat on the chair. Color gleamed at him from the curve of her shoulder as she settled herself on the hoverbed and arranged the pillow under her arms, the spread wings of a butterfly in deep nano-glow violets, magentas and ceruleans. It engaged his sensory feeds on a level he had never experienced with a human, invited him to subsume himself in the layered information written in pigment and neural linkages on her skin.

“This is...unusual and unique.” Beneath his fingertips, the tattoo flickered, information feeding into his sensorium from the nanoparticulates in the ink, a beautiful and vibrant cycle of change and growth rendered in abstract light blossoming in his visual receptors. “Was the artist an Omnic?”
Bethany turned her head to offer him a smile, cheek pillowed on her crossed arms. “Yes,” she said. “I met Teldalla in the hospital after their husband had a heart attack. I was the EMT who responded to the call.”

He looked, and found the signature gracefully concealed in the patterning on the edges of the butterfly’s wings. “Ah, yes. I thought that I recognized the style -- Teldalla is a Shambali adherent but also does not choose to live apart from the world.” He sent a gentle comm-pulse through the connection and delighted as a cloud of butterflies, like ghosts in his visual field, rose in response to circle his head and vanish as if flying away. “I was fortunate to meet them but could not linger long enough to commission a piece.”

“We’ve had some amazing conversations, once they understood my nature.” Her eyes closed again and she settled her forehead on her arms, presenting her back and shoulders to him. “Their work is usually too expensive for me to commission. This--” A slight lift of her tattooed shoulder. “--was apparently a balancing of karma between us. We’ve kept in touch.”

“Their sense of justice would certainly embrace such a thing.” He reached for one of the bottles of lubricant racked in the supplies cabinet and oiled his hands, warmed them with a pulse of rerouted internal power, and laid them gently on the tense muscles of her neck, systems reaching out to interface with her cyberware. *Inform me immediately if this becomes uncomfortable in any way.*

The silent groan of pleasure shivered through her entire body, and her shoulders unbunched just a little. *Absolutely.*

Dr. Liu’s body was remarkably responsive to touch as he set to work tending those tight muscles, working away knots occasioned by stress and sleeplessness, delicately probing her cybernetics and making small adjustments as he went to support those efforts. It had, clearly, been some time since her last comprehensive systems overhaul though some recent maintenance had obviously taken place. Except for a few small sounds, she was also almost entirely silent despite the feedback filtering into his sensorium that suggested extreme relief from significant discomfort, as though she had trained herself to restrain any noise, no matter how benign its origin. *I am reasonably certain you will not disturb Lieutenant Shimada-McCree if you wish to vocalize. How long has it been since your last adjustments?*

*How long ago did Overwatch fall?* A noise did escape her lips then, a deep *mmmpmhf* of relief and enjoyment. *I couldn’t risk it. They would have pulled my wiring and cyber-rigging. I’m not Angie, and I didn’t have the unassailable armor she does to avoid most of the UN’s sanctions.*

*Understandable.* His hands came to rest in the small of her back. *The spa here offers cybernetic recalibration services -- and asks no awkward questions about how one might have come to possess them. Genji has availed himself and they would certainly be able to assist you, as well.*

*You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know,* she replied wryly, now face down in the pillow with her arms loose at her sides, sounds now louder but also muffled by the pillows. *Finding time is the problem, and someone to go with me.*

*I would certainly do so, if you wish.* He traced careful effleurage strokes up the length of her spine. *Do you think Agent Tsujimura would benefit from such treatments?*

*Definitely.* The moan this time was completely unmistakeable, last bit of tension draining from her spine and shoulders, knots and snarls more clearly visible as spots of astriction dotting her back. *Nate doesn’t take proper care of himself half the time. His system is a mess that I’ve only begun to straighten out, but proper tools to do so would be -- gods, that’s a good spot -- better.*
Quite unexpectedly, the partition dividing the cubicle they occupied from the rest of the medical suite slid open and, for an instant, the very man in question stood there, visibly frozen. Zenyatta had, over the years, had cause to become extremely proficient at rapid analysis of human body language and expressions and even his comprehensive suite of observation tools decided that what he was observing could best be described as a fifty-car pile-up of conflicting responses. “Ah, Agent Tsujimura. Good afternoon. How may we assist you?”

Agent Tsujimura swallowed visibly, looking between Bethany on the table and Zenyatta himself, still working on Bethany’s erector spinae, and closed his eyes as if mentally reciting numbers. “Jesse--” he squeaked, then cleared his throat and scrubbed his hands over his face. “I mean, Commander McCree needs to talk to everyone and--”

At that moment, he must have touched a particularly sensitive place on Bethany’s back, because she moaned aloud in sheer, delighted relief, arching up into his digits. Still facing Agent Tsujimura, Zenyatta watched as the blood drained entirely out of his face, his eyes went round and wide, and he gulped audibly. “Upstairs in the war room ten minutes see you there.”

“Oh dear,” Zenyatta murmured aloud, as Agent Tsujimura retreated. “This sounds urgent.” He paused, sought the proper words. “I hope we did not disturb him too much.”

“Nate’s a little high strung, but he’ll be fine,” came the languid, fond reply as Bethany stretched like a cat, and made a series of small moaning groans as her vertebrae cracked and settled. “Oh gods, that’s a thousand percent better,” she said aloud, cautiously testing her flexibility in a series of stretches and gentle motions as she stood again and flashed him a bright, less strained grin. “Thank you so much, Zenyatta. I look forward to being able to balance our karma at some point.”

“I will make the appointment to do so later this afternoon.” Zenyatta allowed amusement to color his voice and went to clean his hands.

*****

Jesse’s second official Blackwatch meeting as Commander in charge started off much the same way his first one had. Coffee and a selection of other drinks, baked pastries from that one shop a few floors down that Hanzo was so fond of patronizing, and comfortable seating. The difference this time was that there was much more seating, as befit the expanded inner circle of Blackwatch 2.0.

Hanzo floated in a holovid window on his left, above the tablet he’d placed in front of the seat on his right, and he couldn’t help but fuss at it just a little. “Are you sure Bets said you’re fine to conference in like this, darlin’? She said you shouldn’t be back to work just yet, and I think this qualifies as work.”

“No,” Hanzo replied, serenely, and rubbed more sleep out of his eyes. “I am not certain of that at all.”

“They rest. I got this.” He tried a stern look, reconsidered that halfway through making it, realized Hanzo would just laugh at him, and went for an affable grin instead.

*I am monitoring Lieutenant Shimada-McCree,* Psyche said, in an eerily similar serene tone. *Doctor*
Liu trusts my judgement in this matter. Should his biotelemetry alter in such a way as to be dangerous to his health, I have the authority to close the link and summon either Dr. Liu or Medic Zenyatta.

Somehow, Jesse suspected even Psyche’s authority outstripped his own in this matter. He idly wondered if Gabe had ever had similarly uncharitable thoughts towards his own medical staff.

“I am fine, beloved. All I need to do is lay here and watch.” Hanzo assured him in a tone that in no way suggested he intended to do far, far more than just observe.

Jesse squinted at him suspiciously nonetheless, because his husband was terribly devious on the best of days. “Darlin’, I--”

Whatever he was going to say -- he wasn’t even sure himself yet -- was forever lost when the door opened to admit the first of the arriving officers: the Old Men, with Zenyatta and Beth seemingly in animated conversation coming close on their heels. Down the hall was a shock of green hair, right next to a shock of blue hair, and he could hear Lena’s high, musical laugh ringing from beyond them.

From the screen, Hanzo let out a sound that could almost be a sigh of relief.

The Old Men took their seats after fixing their coffee, and Jesse watched in amusement as Beth, still deep in conversation with Zenyatta about tattoos and cyberspas, of all things, put together not only her own plate of apple danishes, but two others besides, handing them to Genji and Nate as they came to the table behind her. Nate looked up from his tablet long enough to accept and flash a grin of thanks, though he got out from between Beth and Genji with vaguely unnatural alacrity and slipped into a chair next to Old Man Tieh, whose ear he immediately bent in low-voiced conversation. Old Man Tieh elbowed Old Man Zheng and all three of them huddled over the tablet.

Lena, Lian, Meilin and Reiko arrived as Beth was escorted to her seat by a suspiciously solicitous Genji who carried both their plates and coffee cups, Zenyatta floating serenely behind them, and Hades help him, but whatever had the four women cackling like particularly sadistic interrogators, Jesse never wanted to know.

He waited until everyone had gotten food and gotten seated before clearing his throat, ending conversations and drawing their attention to him. “Mornin’, y’all,” he said, and sipped his coffee. “Thanks for comin’ on short notice. We’ve only got a few items of business for this meetin’, but one’s a doozy. Icebreaker? Y’ready?”

“That I am.” Nate took one last swallow of coffee. “For those that weren’t here last time, my primary task since arriving here was sussing out how our fearless Commander and Lieutenant ended up on Talon’s radar, when the location of their honeymoon retreat was closely guarded for reasons of operational security. Unfortunately, the answer was an informant inside the arcology, sending intel through a secure communication line hidden inside the daily incoming-outgoing and encrypted to disguise its origination point and its destination.”

An assortment of shocked noises came out of Meilin and Lian and Reiko, a snort from Old Man Zheng, and a narrow-eyed look from Old Man Tieh. Jesse, keeping a surreptitious eye on Meilin, finally satisfied the last of his lingering doubt about her -- from her expression of surprise, she’d known nothing of the mole at all.

“On the fortunate hand, we have managed to identify the source of the information leak.” Nate flicked his wrist and sent a fan of holo-monitors spinning in the air above the table: the times and dates of the communications, going back years , who they went to, who sent them. “At the risk of
being accused of milking this for the melodrama, we know it was Old Man Jian, who appears to be rather more than he seems on first blush, as well.”

A noise of shock and distress came from the other end of the table, and only for Jesse was still watching Meilin’s face that he knew she made it. He watched her face blanch white, the blood drain from her cheeks, her eyes grow wide and horrified and furious. She abruptly stood up, the chair legs screeching back almost before Nate could finish speaking, hands whitening into trembling fists on the table. “I--” she said, unsteadily, thick and emotional, and physically swayed as though she wanted to fall over again. “I-- have brought dishonor to you. I will... I will...

Lena’s hand covered the nearest of Meilin’s to her, and said, gentle but fierce: “This is not your fault.” She shot a look to Jesse, an eyebrow quirked. “Right? This isn’t her fault.”

Jesse shot that same look to Hanzo, suddenly grateful he’d chosen to comm into the conference, because he really might have been the best choice for soothing Meilin. Let it never be said he didn’t know how to delegate. “Darlin’?”

“Of course not.” Hanzo’s voice managed that trick where it was both firm and gentle at the same time. “You could not have known, Meilin, and in any case you are not at fault for the actions of your grandfather.”

Lian gently pulled Meilin down into her chair again, and wrapped an arm around her, shooting defiant stares around, just in case anyone looked askance at Meilin, and Jesse pitied anyone who did, because little old Lian looked scary. “If he snooped through your personal belongings to learn details,” she said, “that is his responsibility and his actions, not yours.”

“Take it from me,” Genji said, more than a little wryly. “Family elders are assholes. You can’t stop them, anymore than you can stop the tide. No one here blames you.”

“Not a one,” Jesse added, reassuringly. “The hell am I gonna run this place without you? Ain’t possible, and that’s a fact.” He nodded then to Nate. “Keep goin’, ‘Breaker. She’ll get through it.”

“The identity that Old Man Jian established to apply for residency here in the arcology was admirably load-bearing, I’ll give whoever built it that -- it stood up to a more than reasonable standard of review.” Another flick and another set of screens: a much younger Old Man Jian, including his real name, a selection of photographs, arrest records, prior history. “It took awhile to find the weakness. From what I can determine, Old Man Jian was once Yao Jiao-long, a high-ranking member of the Shimada-gumi recruited to help spearhead the organization’s expansion into mainland Chinese markets in the chaos that followed the Omnic Crisis. The local criminal communities all hated his ass because he turned coat and joined forces with the Yakuza for his own profit -- in fact, his wife was a distant Shimada cousin. All in the family, y’know. He had to take cover when Blackwatch hit the Shimada-gumi back in the day and their operations contracted sharply, but he was too valuable to expend and retained most of his contacts, helped do what he could...and then Hanzo moved in here, and suddenly his position had even more value. He’s been watching and reporting intermittently practically since you took up residence, Lieutenant.”

Meilin put her head down between her arms and breathed carefully in and out, slowly and steadily, as Lian murmured things to her and rubbed gentle circles with a hand into her shoulders. Jesse’s heart abruptly went out to her in pity and sympathy, because her world had been turned upside down and shaken about, and Jesse knew that feeling pretty fuckin’ well.

When she raised her head again, her face was a perfectly still mask of calm and disaffectedness that Jesse would swear she’d peeled right off his own dearest darlin’s face.
It’s the Shimada in her, Charon said smugly. I knew I liked that girl for a reason. She’s a dragon in disguise.

You knew nothin’, Jesse retorted. Stop pretendin’ you did.

“Hsieh Tieh, Hsieh Zheng,” she said, still eerily calm. “My friends, I request your assistance on a matter of personal importance this evening. Will you be free to join me for a sunset sail on the harbor?”

Old Man Zheng grinned his terrible snaggle-toothed someone’s gonna get it grin. “I like the way you think, girl. Don’t you like the way she thinks, Tieh?”

“I have materials that we can use to make it look like a heart attack if we can’t get a boat arranged in time,” Old Man Tieh replied, dryly. Across the table, Beth placed her hands over her ears, though she didn’t look the least bit disturbed by the line of conversation.

Blackwatch does that to a medic, Charon noted. Wonder if that’s a bad thing or a good thing? Jesse had no answer for him, and so didn’t reply.

“You are both terrifying and I can see why you’ve been slotted into Ops.” Nate closed the screens. “I have, for the record, interdicted his communications channel -- it looks like it’s successfully making contact but it’s dumping into a secured server in the Blackwatch archive.”

“Has any attempt been made to contact who I assume is my darlin’ mother in law herself since we’ve come home, ‘Breaker?” Jesse asked, shooting an amused look at Genji, who rolled his eyes dramatically back at him. “Curious to see what the little bird’s singin’, myself.”

“Yes -- at least three attempts in the last few days.” He pulled up the communications list, scrolled to the most recent block of outgoing messages. “He made legit contact with at least once but there has been no reply.”

“What happens if Shimama tries to contact Old Man Jian?” Lena leaned forward on her elbows, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “And is there any tactical advantage in pretending that the communication is open both ways still?”

“There’s always an advantage to be found in controlling the flow of information.” Nate replied, a not-so-nice smile of his own coming to camp on his face. “Maintaining the contact allows us to feed misinformation to the Shimada-gumi pretty much at will.”

She returned that grin, sharp and sweet. “And her communiques are likewise dumped into our server instead of Jian’s?”

“But of course. Wouldn’t do any good to have them go anywhere else.” He cast her a sidelong look. “Are you being devious? That looks like a devious look to me.”

“Who me? Devious? Hardly. I am as pure and innocent as a fresh snowfall, darling.” Lena’s return smile to Nate smile was, indeed, her most innocent and reassuring, which Jesse knew from personal, first-hand experience meant trouble of the kind that involved shooting and running and shooting some more.

There’s likely to be a lot of that in our near future, Jess, Charon said in a tone that sounded almost obliged to point that out. Life bein’ what it is an’ all.

“Fine with me,” Jesse murmured, drawing a sharp look of his own from Genji, who arched an inquisitive eyebrow at him as the room erupted in chatter again. He just grinned and shook his
head in return. *Fine by me.*
Chapter 26

Chapter by Nagaina

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place after "Despacito." It will make more sense if you read that side-story first.

Hanzo dreamt. He knew he was dreaming because only in his dreams did he still remember his father’s face, how it looked before years of stress and ill-health took their toll on him, his smile warm and easy as he sat on the balcony overlooking the inner garden, a bowl of tea in his hands and his work tablet set aside, basking in the late afternoon sunshine. It felt like spring, the air still carrying a hint of winter’s bite but still sweet with the perfume of blooming sakura, and holding in it the promise of warmer days to come. That balcony had always been his favorite place to retreat and renew himself when the strain of dealing with the myriad vocal demands of the clan’s elders -- theoretically his subordinates, more practically an endlessly nagging chorus of competing schemes and demands disguised as advice -- and the silent but sharper demands of their mother, the daughter of the previous kumichō, to whom he owed his place atop the Shimada-gumi.

"Otousan," Hanzo said, and was surprised by the sound of his own voice -- younger, lighter, not yet graveled with age or years of abuse. “You should come inside. It is getting cold.”

“Yes, I should.” Sojiro agreed, but made no move to do so -- instead stretching out his hand. “Come. Join me.”

Hanzo drifted to his side, folded gracefully into seiza opposite, as his father poured tea into a second bowl and passed it to him, golden and fragrant with spice, his favorite. “Thank you, otousan. But why --”

“I should have sent you away, to be educated elsewhere. You and your brother both. It was my right as the lord of the clan to make such a choice -- but your mother was wholly opposed to such a course, and I did not enjoy enough support to overturn her will in the matter.” The corners of his mouth quirked, wry and bitter. “I thought then that if I kept you both close, I might be able to teach you different, better ways myself but, in the end, all I succeeded in doing was alienating you from your brother in my efforts to save one of you from her relentless ambitions.”

“That was not your fault. I could have --” Hanzo began and had to resist the urge to scramble back as his father’s fist slammed into the table, overturning pot and bowls, his anger scorching the air with a scent like lightning striking.

“You were a child. It was not your responsibility to choose which path to follow, it was mine to guide you correctly. Your mother’s to guide you correctly. And we failed both you and Genji.” His father’s eyes shone dragon-bright and piercing but the hand that took his own was gentle. “And yet I see that you have both become men of whom I would be proud, almost in spite of us both.”

Hanzo’s eyes stung and his throat closed and it took him a long moment to discipline both enough to speak. “Not spite. I --”
“I know,” Sojiro-who-was-not-a-dream replied. “Very well, you aren’t doing it out of spite. I commend your husband’s influence and that of your hellion brother. My I request that you tell him to visit, on occasion, that I may tease him relentlessly about his inability to see what is directly under his nose? That boy’s spouses await the realization of his destiny with varying degrees of serenity.”

“Of course, otousan.” That came out remarkably calm, given the circumstances. “I will -- wait. Spouses?”

“Yes.” Sojiro replied, cryptically, and leaned over to brush a kiss to his forehead. “You must go back now, my son. But know that I watch over you, over you both, and never have I been prouder of who you have both chosen to be.” A little twinkle came into his eye. “Also, your comm is sounding and your husband is too asleep to hear it. Wake up.”

“Wake up, Lieutenant.”

The comm was, indeed, going off as Hanzo’s eyes snapped open, though it took him a moment to recognize Lady Alecto’s voice, underlaid with a faint rising-falling tone, one he had never heard before. Next to, and mostly wrapped around him, Jesse slept the sleep of the just, or the exhausted, one arm slung around his waist, head on his shoulder, and from the quality of the light in the room he could tell the hour was obscenely early. “My lady...what is...who is calling?”

“My apologies for disturbing your rest, Lieutenant,” Lady Alecto said, and that rising-falling note in her voice abruptly focused as subtle glee. “Your in-laws are pinging Blackwatch frequencies with Command encryption, and Jesse is so deep in slumber for even Charon to reach easily.”

“My in -- oh. Oh.” The last of the sleep fled his mind as he reached for the comm with one hand and jostled Jesse, currently extracting all the feeling from one of his arms, with the other. “Beloved. Beloved, wake up. Your parents are calling.”

Jesse’s eyes opened, hazy and unfocused, and he stared at Hanzo as if not really seeing him. “S’nice,” he mumbled, and snuggled in more closely, tugging Hanzo firmly against his chest, one hand starting to wander friskily as his nose dipped behind his ear to nuzzle. “Good f’r them, darlin’.”

Under normal circumstances, Hanzo would not have considered this an unwelcome way to start the day -- but, given the potential gravity of the situation, he instead took possession of the hands attempting to find their way inside his sleeping yukata and held them in place. “Beloved, they are calling on Blackwatch comm frequencies using Command level encryption.”

Jesse made a discontented noise, halfway a growl, that rumbled against the sensitive skin of his throat, and his teeth scraped his earlobe. “Playin’ hard to ge-- wait, what?” He jerked back, blinking sleep and desire out of his eyes. “Okay. I’m awake. What’d you just say? Somethin’ about my parents?”

“Yes.” He repressed the shiver that tried to rise from Jesse’s actions and handed over the comm pad. “According to Lady Alecto they are attempting to contact us.”

“Don’t go anywhere,” he said with a smouldering look and another deep, vocal rumble as he took the pad and input his credentials. “I ain’t nearly done with you yet. Link authorized, Alecto. Let ‘em through.”

The comm’s audio channel crackled gently, the screen flickered, and a gravelly voice, one that had spoken calm instruction and assistance in his ear some weeks before said, “Took you long
It is the middle of the fuckin’ night here, mami,” Jesse said, his face perfectly calm even though Hanzo could all but feel the churning of clashing emotions in his own belly, the drawl thickening just slightly with the dryness of his comment. “This is when civilized folks like to be safe and sound in their own beds.”

“All right, you have a marginal point, because I know your lieutenant can be described accurately as civilized.” That gravelly voice used amusement the way some people used flat and dry, the emotion just barely hidden. “I’m sorry for calling so late or so early, but Jack and I thought it best that we inform you of the imminence of our arrival rather than just rolling up on the arcology landing pad.”

“In other words,” Jesse drawled, voice echoing that amusement to eerie accuracy, and he slid out of bed, one hand feeling around for his pants on the floor, “y’all decided to come in for a visit, you wanted to have us turn around and there you are behind us, but Dad talked you into not getting the botha you shot the second you crept in.”

“I’m not going to answer that on the grounds that it may incriminate me later.” Wryly. “We’re about three hours out.”

“And are y’stayin’ for awhile, or just poppin’ in en route to elsewhere? S’the difference between preppin’ a vacant flat, or stickin’ you in Lena’s spare room.” Jesse tossed the comm tablet back at Hanzo and wriggled into his jeans, letting the conflict of extreme emotions crash down onto his face for just a second as he fumbled with his zipper. “For note, Lena’s not any better at rememberin’ all parts of the chore wheel.”

The line hissed quietly for a moment. Then, “To stay.” More softly, “If you’ll have us. We’d like to stay.”

Jesse’s head lowered for a moment, the shaggy hair falling across his face and throwing it into shadow, and his hands flexed at his sides. When he raised his head a moment later, his eyes glittered suspiciously, and a long string of rapid Spanish emerged, carried on a soft laugh, that Hanzo had no hope of translating, though he noted the frequency of such words like pendejo and cabron and mami liberally scattered through.

The reply also came in Spanish, softer still, and this time there was no disguising the emotion in it, a tangle of fondness and muted joy and, unless he missed his guess, more than a trace element of trepidation. “We’ll be there soon, mijo. I for one wouldn’t say no to breakfast. Jack?”

A new voice, gravelly but in a different way that spoke of age and pain, chuckled. “Like I’m gonna say no to food I don’t have to make myself.”

Jesse’s face crumpled, eyes squeezing shut and throat working. He cleared his throat then, eyes on the hand bearing his wedding ring. “I’ll have the Emerald Sun work up a proper feast,” he replied. “And we’ll find a flat for you somewhere… together? Y’all want one together?”

“Yes.” The wry smile was clearly audible across the miles.

“See you then. With food.” He paused, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I make no promises about either Genji’s or Lena’s hyperactivity. You’ve been warned.”

“We’ll take that under advisement. Reyes, out.” The comm channel closed.

Jesse stood still a moment longer, and then sank onto the bed, shoulders and breathing shaky. He
scrubbed his face with both hands, and sighed, then fell back into the pillows beside Hanzo. “Did that just really happen?” he asked, half plaintive and half joking from the hesitancy in his voice. “Tell me that just really happened.”

Hanzo slid an arm beneath his husband’s neck and the other across his chest, bent to nuzzle him comfortingly. “That really just happened. Your parents will be here in… slightly less than three hours.”

“We’re gonna have to kick a whole buncha people outta bed to get ready for their arrival.” Jesse looked up at him, speculative. “Probably don’t have time for anything, huh?”

“Hmmm. In the shower? Kill two birds with one stone?” Hanzo suggested, smiling serenely.

“Never let it be said your efficiency ain’t a turn on,” Jesse said with a laugh, and tugged playfully at the closure of his yukata. “Alecto, will you do me a favor, sweetheart, and go on and wake up the usual suspects? They’ll wanna be on hand for the reunion, I suspect.”

“As you wish, Commander McCree,” Lady Alecto murmured, amusement politely muted, and began contacting the rest of Blackwatch to let them know their erstwhile former commanders were on the way home.

Hanzo rose, shrugged his yukata off his shoulders, and reached for his husband’s hand. “Come, my love. I have a feeling this will be the most relaxation either of us enjoy for at least the next day or two.”

“And I’ve got a feeling you’re absolutely correct about that,” Jesse chuckled as he rose, and this time, when his hand wandered southward in playful interest, Hanzo let it stay where it landed.

***

The comm channel went dead, and Jack let out the sigh he’d been holding. “There,” he murmured, an arm dropped over Gabe’s shoulders in reassurance. “Now don’t you feel better?”

Gabe took a deep, cleansing breath and released it, shakily, as the sensation not entirely like nor precisely unlike a panicky adrenaline spike ebbed and flowed away. “Yes, yes I actually do. Okay. You were right about calling.”

His hand tightened on Gabe’s shoulder, almost a one-armed hug, if not for the awkwardness of the seating arrangements in their transport. “Of course I was,” he said with unbearable smugness, the asshole, but then his lips touched the back of Gabe’s neck in the exact spot that made him shiver, and he forgot to be irritated about it. “I’m still expecting one of them to punch me in the face,” he added, wryly. “I’m not sure I wouldn’t deserve it.”

“Lena. It’s going to be Lena. Lena will definitely punch you in the face.” Gabe swallowed the cackle trying to claw its way up his throat. “Of course, I’m pretty sure that Jesse is going to punch me and we’re so going to deserve it because we are literally the worst parents.”

“Not quite the worst, pumpkin.” He could hear Jack’s grin even without looking at it. “Pretty sure Fareeha still doesn’t know her mother’s not only alive, but is actually not that far from her.”

“Look, Ana has enough reasons to shoot us as it is, implying even in passing that she’s the worst parent in this group means she’s going to use the real bullets and not the tranq darts.” Gabe felt it contingent to point out for their future safety.

“I don’t know what you’re worried about,” Jack grumbled. “I shot her with her own rifle. She’s
gonna hit me first, which gives you plenty of opportunity to escape while I’m keeping her occupied.”

“I would never abandon you to face Ana’s righteous fury alone,” Gabe lied sincerely. “I’d come back with reinforcements.”

“Bullshit,” Jack said pleasantly. “I love you, pumpkin, but don’t fuckin’ lie. You’d leave me behind while Ana expresses her displeasure, and use the opportunity to put as many miles as you could between you and her. I’m your head start.”

“My love, you wound me to the soul.” Gabe half-turned to face him, eyes huge and tragic. “Seriously, Jesse could totally talk her down. Did you hear him just now? I knew that boy was leadership material.”

“You convinced me of that twenty years ago when we adopted his scrawny ass,” Jack drawled in amusement, and leaned back in his chair to stretch his spine. “As long as he doesn’t call her a fucking pendejo, amongst other affectionate epithets, like he did you, he might just be able to talk her down at that.”

“He’d never.” Gabe leaned back in his chair. “...We might want to give her a call and let her know it’s safe to come in from the cold now.”

“... Maybe you should make that call.” Jack sounded furtive, and Gabe could almost see the eyes skittering back and forth in his face, without having to turn around. He never could hide his emotions, especially when they involved avoidance of unpleasantness. “She’s probably less pissed with you at this point.”

“Okay, you may have a point there, too.” Gabe allowed, a sensation not entirely unlike mercy moving his heart. “Lemme have whatever comm code she’s using right now. Who knows, she might beat us to Hong Kong...”

Jack slid his comm over Gabe’s shoulder and then ducked his bulk as best he could behind the riser of Gabe’s seat. “Speed dial three,” he said, voice muffled from the way his face had to be jammed into his knees in that small space. “And remember, you have no idea where I am. Or who I am. Sell it hard, baby. I love you.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all of our lovely fans and readers, for all your comments and encouragement during the course of this project. Here ends Season One of God Programs and Monsters. Up next: Side fics! Because you know we have some. And then: The Awakening of Devils.

The wind coming off the distant harbor was cool against his skin, almost chilly in the pre-dawn air, but Jesse barely noticed it as he scanned the horizon, looking for the telltale black dot that would signal an incoming transport carrying the two people he’d honest to God never thought he’d ever see again in this life. There was nothing yet, not that his eyes could pick out, anyway, and likely would be nothing for at least another ten or so minutes. But it was Christmas morning, according to the giddy emotions swirling in his gut, and his body refused to process it calmly and in an orderly fashion, instead preferring the shifting, restless, nervous energy currently thrumming in his limbs.

A soft but very deliberate noise caught his ear, coming up from behind, and Genji handed up a cup of Cafe de Miki’s best coffee and a breakfast sandwich still in its wrapper. “I decided to forego the squeezable stress plushy for now.” He sipped his own coffee, filtration mask hanging loose around his neck, and turned to scan the sky as well.

Jesse snorted, even as he appreciatively sipped his cup and tore the wrapper open on his sandwich, wolfing down a bite. “I’m gonna tell Beth you called her that,” he mumbled around the food, grinning cheekily at him.

Genji applied a Look that would have been a bit more threatening if he were still rocking the blood-red optical scanner modifications. “Why did I ever think Hanzo was my worst brother?”

“Because objectively, he’s the one you grew up with.” He took another sip and devoured the rest of his sandwich, tucking the now-empty wrapper in his pocket. “I’m the one you matured with.”

“Also, when did you become the wise and enlightened one? I mean, I’ve actually lived in a Nepalese monastery.” It didn’t actually sound like a complaint. “Is this what being truly grown up feels like? Taking the reins? Being the ones in charge? Waiting for our parents to come home and approve?”

“Adulthood, as I understand it,” Jesse said sagely, bumping him gently with his shoulder. “Is ninety percent faking it, and ten percent bein’ grateful y’remembered to put your pants on when you got up.” He side-eyed him, grinned and said, “Well. Maybe y’oughta work on that one. Your ass is nice an’ all, but Hanzo may kill you if he catches me lookin’ at it again.”

Genji called him something in Japanese that he probably learned hanging out in Yakuza gambling dens in his misspent youth. “Where is my esteemed elder brother, anyway? You’d think he’d be here to finally meet his in-laws.”

“I think he’s organizing breakfast. Mami said he and Dad would be comin’ in hungry, and SEP graduates have appetites.” Jesse sighed faintly, scrubbed his face with his free hand. “Plus I think
he’s givin’ me space to be emotional without him witnessin’ it.”

“That sounds like something Hanzo would do to avoid awkward first meetings. Lena told me about the spread he put out in Alberta.” A wry smile, and a glance over his shoulder at the lift bank, where the doors had just opened to admit Lena, and Beth, and Nate, all at once. “Are you sure you want the rest of us here?”

“Y’all got just as much right to be here as I do, li’l brother,” he reminded him, and reached out to clasp his shoulder. “Me an’ Lena might be the only official kids, but Mami was nothing if not a broody motherfucker adoptin’ every orphan he tripped on.”

“True.” Genji’s smile grew less wry as he stepped aside to let the newcomers join them.

“Like Dumbledore, only not covertly manipulative,” Lena agreed as she joined them, sliding under Jesse’s arm to give him a side-hug and then Genji. “Mama didn’t bother hiding his manipulations from everyone, that’s how good he is.” She tilted her head thoughtfully, then added confidently, “But he’s every bit just as gay as Dumbledore. Probably more gay.”

“Now there’s a mental image that will never leave me as long as I exist. Thank you, Lena.” Nate blinked owlishly in the entirely too normal light of the early morning. “Any idea of their ETA?”

“Seven minutes, darling.” Surprisingly, it was Beth, coming behind Nate with each hand holding two takeaway cups from Cafe de Miki, who replied. Jesse arched an eyebrow and she shrugged.

“What? I’m Blackwatch CMO. If Gabe didn’t want agents returning from long-term assignments to be automatically scheduled for immediate physical checkups, he shouldn’t have written the damn policy to begin with.” She handed a cup to Nate and tore the tab on her own, sipping with obvious relish. “You don’t get one,” she told Lena’s huge-eyed pout. “You’re hyper enough without adding caffeine.”

“Seven minutes. That’s not long to figure out who’s going to do the punching and who’s going to do the hugging. Jess? I think you should hug. Just to take them off guard.” Nate sipped his coffee. “Then Genji can do his Cirque du Soleil ninja stuff and take them from behind and that sounded so much less terrible in my head, forget I said anything.”

“I would pay very good money to see Genji in Cirque,” Lena said, and poked him gently in the belly. “Though I’m pretty sure it would not be an all-ages sort of event.”

Jesse chuckled and drained the rest of his coffee, then took a quick sidestep to deposit the cup in the nearby recycler. “With respect to Hanzo’s stress levels after finding Genji naked in the kitchen this morning,” he said ruefully, “I will skip that show.”

“I am receiving a request for primary vectors to the landing pad,” Alecto chose that moment to serenely chime in. “Two minute warning.”

“Y’all ready?” Jesse asked, hoping that his answer was yes, forget about anyone else.

“Ready as we get.” Beth sucked in a breath and blew it out, shaking herself as if to wake up. “I’ve got a mean right hook,” she said with a bright smile. “Genji and Jess should do the hugging. Nate and I’ll clock ‘em. They really won’t expect that.”

****

“Vectors locked.” To his own complete astonishment, Gabe managed to keep his voice and his hands simultaneously calm and still and level as they made their way through the hover traffic over Hong Kong and zeroed in on Green Sky’s upper landing platform. “Two minutes. I think it’s
officially too late to run, Jack.”

“Not the least because Hades has already locked you out of the controls so you don’t change your mind at the very last second, I’ve no doubt,” Jack replied in amusement, and rested one hand on each of Gabe’s shoulders, thumbs stroking the back of his neck soothingly. “They’ll cry, they’ll scream, you’ll discorporate into a puddle of nanogoo marshmallow sludge. Someone is gonna punch me in the face, I’m sure. And then we’ll move on. Together.”

“Lena. It will definitely be Lena. Lena will punch you in the face and I will laugh my ass off about it.” A small group was gathered just off the actual landing pad.

“Beth. Nate. Genji. Recognize those crayon factory explosion of hair colors anywhere. Somehow,” he said ruefully, one hand against the window as he craned his neck to follow them as the vehicle came in for final approach, “I didn’t expect to see them here right now. It’s gonna be Genji punching me in the face, and that means it’s gonna hurt a lot more. Also, you’re gonna be too busy sobbing over reunion with your baby boy, Reyes, don’t pretend you’re gonna even notice when Genji lays me out.”

“Genji went and found inner peace while we were shooting each other. He’s not going to punch you, it’ll ruin his karma.” They were on the ground and Gabe automatically started the post-flight check running.

“Not if he views it as a rebalancing of my karma,” Jack pointed out, and sucked in a shaky breath as he unclipped his safety harness and reached into the overhead storage for the first of their gear bags. “And, let’s face it, inner peace or not, that boy can hold a fucking grudge.”

“Point.” Gabe agreed and unclipped his harness. “Jesus fuck, Jack, we’re really here and those are our kids out there what the fuck are we even going to say?”

“I’ve been sitting here the whole goddamn flight trying to figure that exact thing out, pumpkin,” he replied. “And I think our best option is to go find an Omnium and see if we can’t jumpstart the Crisis again so we don’t have to deal with it.”

“Jesse would never forgive us -- and that boy can hold a grudge even longer if necessary.” Gabe set the doors cycling, admitting a burst of rain-fresh, high-altitude air.

“Takes after his Mama that way,” Jack said with a smirk, leaned in and kissed him gently. “Let me know how it goes.” And before Gabe could so much as blink, Jack solved the problem of who would be sacrificed to the kids first by neatly shoving him out the door and onto the ramp.

Gabriel Reyes, certified war hero and savior of humanity, super soldier, nanomachine abomination, froze for a moment -- not shocked by the betrayal or its suddenness, both of which were inevitable, but because he was now partially surrounded by a loose semi-circle of his children, actual and by extension.

For a long moment, nobody moved, spoke, blinked or seemingly so much as breathed. And then Bethany cleared her throat, moved forward with a confident pace. “Welcome back, Commander Reyes,” she said in a voice as calm as a pleasant summer day. “Your re-intake physical exam is scheduled for this afternoon you absolute fucking ASSHOLE!” And her fist hit his arm with surprising ferocity and strength before she promptly burst into tears and flung her arms around his neck.

“It’s good to see you again, too, kid.” His arms closed around her and he buried his face in her hair before its stupid inability to stay facelike in the presence of strong emotion freaked anyone out.
“Mind if we get settled first? We’ve traveled light.”

“It’s your policy, sir,” she said fiercely, and for a second, he thought it might be possible she’d discorporate him in self defense for how tight her hug got. “Think about that when reflecting on how inconvenient it is.” When she drew back, she was smiling, despite the tears. “Gods, I missed you.” And she stepped back to let Lena tackle him in turn.

“Your father’s hiding in the vehicle,” Gabe whispered in her ear, and stepped aside to let her blip past him when she was done bruising his ribs.

The startled squawk heralding Jack Morrison, super soldier, tireless leader, stalwart defender of the world, being unexpectedly taken out by a ninety pound girl was music to his ears.

And then, there was no one between him and Jesse, who stood a few feet away, a few years older, a few years tireder, but with a lightness and ease to his face that was new. It looked goddamn good on him. “Mami.” He cleared his throat, eyes suspiciously damp-looking, and a shaky smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. “Bienvenido. ¿Que pasa?”

“Mijo.” Gabe did not have a heartbeat -- hadn’t, in fact, had a heartbeat in years, since Geneva -- and yet the inside of his chest throbbed and squirmed and ached as though there were something in there to actually quicken under stress. “I’ve had worse days. You?”

“Definitely had worse days.” His breath hitched and then he was moving, two long strides the spot in front of Gabe, but he didn’t stop there, he slid his arms around him like it had only been yesterday they’d last seen each other, and closed tight. “For the record,” he mumbled into Gabe’s shoulder, choked and raw, “I am mightily pissed at y’all.”

“You’ve got just cause.” Gabe held onto form with all his might, closed his eyes, held his son tight. “I’ve missed you, Jessito.”

“I’ve missed you too, mami.” His breath was shallow and kept hitching, but he didn’t move away, just kept hugging, clinging almost, like he was afraid Gabe would disappear again if he didn’t hold him in place. “So much. Everything got all fucked up for a long time.”

“I know. And a lot of that was my fault.” His hand stayed mercifully handlike as he buried it in Jesse’s hair, stroked gently. “You deserved better, and I should have done better, and I will spend the rest of my life making things right, I promise you that.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” he said, and finally lifted off his now-wet shoulder, and Jesse’s grin was uncontrollably happy. “Beth’s fixin’ to confine you under lock and key until she’s sure y’ain’t gonna vanish again, and Genji’s been practicing his ninjing just for y’all. I don’t even wanna contemplate what Nate’s been doing to keep an eye on you.” And so saying, he reached out, under Gabe’s arm, and snagged Nate by the sleeve to tug him in for his turn.

“For the record, I was just planning to insert some jackware so you’d turn into a nanopuddle we could just vacuum up at will if you left the arcology without a live transponder tuned to Ops frequencies.” Nate’s hug was quick but thorough and his grin completely shit-eating. “And something to deactivate Jack’s visor implants because I know he hasn’t spent a single minute learning how to walk with a cane.”

“... Jack?” Gabe managed, just barely, to resist the urge to twist his head all the way around and apply the glare he felt turning his eyes red.

The man himself had finally emerged from the vehicle and was currently three feet behind him,
smothered between the girls, Lena glomping him from the left, with Beth on the right. Jack, suspiciously teary and looking just the tiniest bit claustrophobic, glanced his way as he helplessly stroked hair and murmured promises that he wouldn’t leave again. Help me, he mouthed frantically.

“I’m going to take pity on you because I wouldn’t want to be accused of kicking a blind man when he’s down,” Gabe replied, sweetly. “Could you two help your poor old dad with our luggage? It’s not much.”

Jack blinked, and then went white, and his face got that furtive look when he knew Gabe had caught him doing something and he was looking for a quick exit. “... I love you?”

“You’re lucky I love you as much as I do and we’ll talk about this later. At length.” Gabe’s smile was toothy enough that Nate, at close enough range to get the full effect, stepped back three paces and got out his comm unit to film the proceedings for future generations of agents.

“You’re blind?!” Bethany’s outrage was almost counterpoint to his own, unfettered and piercingly disapproving, and Jack blinked down at her, almost visibly and comically wilting under the force of her Overwatch Medical, Valkyrie Division-issued unamused stare. “You will be, of course, planning on dropping by Medical at your earliest convenience.” It was not a question. Her words could not have been more clipped or more frosty, and Gabe could not be prouder.

“Of course,” Jack lied easily, as if that was an order he had no long and sordid history of avoiding, ignoring, or flat out not complying with. “Right at the top of my to-do list, Bets.” He glanced at Nate, eyes narrowed and seething with the promise of violence in his immediate future. “You,” he growled under his breath, “are gonna pay for that, Tsujimura.”

“I’ve already backed this up in six different offsite storage locations and sent a copy to Alecto for safekeeping.” Nate replied, tucking his comm away again. “You can pay for my therapy.”

“You have bad habits,” Jack said gruffly, and shot a side-eye death stare at Gabe as he stepped forward to accept his own Nate-shaped quick hug. “Wonder where you picked those up?”

Gabe waved him off with airy nonchalance. “Probably somewhere in Switzerland. Shall we head inside before a security drone or a spy satellite or something spots us? We’re both technically wanted criminals and I’d like to meet my son-in-law before any other disasters befall us.”

oOoOoOo

Things had changed -- changed, ineluctably and absolutely, and far more quickly than he had ever imagined possible. It had, Hanzo realized, as he went about the process of finishing out some old loose ends and formally taking himself completely off the market with his regular contract intermediaries, not even been a whole year yet. But in that time, since returning home to an unexpected message from his long-estranged, not-yet-dead brother, he found the love his life had always lacked, married him, and acquired a vastly expanded family of their choice and a purpose beyond continuing to exist until someone proved his martial superior.

It was, he was forced to admit to himself, still a bit overwhelming.

Meilin, moving around him with the patient and unhurried steps of someone well-acclimated to arranging middling-to-large gatherings — a previously-unknown cousin of his, family by choice and, surprisingly, an actual blood relation only discovered after the fact — picked with exacting precision at the arrangement of flowers on the table, smoothing petals and adjusting leaves and sprays of ferns by increments until she was satisfied with the presentation. “There,” she said in
satisfaction, smiling and pleased. “You are officially prepared to receive your husband’s family, itoko-chan. The caterers from the Emerald Sun will be here shortly to begin setting up.”

“Thank you, Meilin.” Hanzo replied, finding genuine comfort in her care and her competence but not able to translate that into actual relaxation. “What would I do without you?”

“Collapse into a puddle of anxiety and indecision, most likely.” The note in her voice was gentle and teasing, not harsh and critical. “For all that you are frighteningly competent and accomplished, Hanzo, you are equally an emotional disaster when you let your insecurities get the best of you.”

Hanzo blinked at her, startled. “You are not wrong about that, I admit it.”

She smiled up at him, eyes warm. “How are you coping?”

“I am only barely resisting crawling down the side of the building and hiding in a park somewhere.” Hanzo replied, honestly, surprising even himself. “I know this sounds foolish. One of them already risked his own safety in order to save my life.”

“When I met Lian’s mother,” Meilin said, after a moment of thoughtful silence, “it was amongst the most stressful occasions I have ever suffered. Her mother is very traditional, and a girlfriend was not her preference for her only daughter, her only child. She desired grandchildren, you see, and she could not understand how two women would produce a grandchild she could love.” Her hands rose to smooth the folds of his yukata across his shoulders, picking invisible lint from the fabric and brushing it with her palm. “What I did not understand was that her mother loved my Lian very much, and wanted most of all to see her happy with someone who adored her. Ngokhmou saw that I was that person, and all of the rest of her concerns fell away.”

“Which was only right and just. How could anyone find fault with a woman as perfect as you?” Hanzo smiled fondly at her. “I can but hope to enjoy such fortune. Since they are coming through the garden.” He his his hands in the sleeves of his yukata lest the urge to tangle them into a knot betray him.

“Breathe,” she reminded him gently, and mercilessly pulled his hands out of his sleeves to hold them warmly in hers for a moment. “From all the stories you have heard, from everything you know about these two men, you are already past the hard part. Don’t retreat into formality now. We’ve only just coaxed you out of it.”

“Darlin’!” he heard Jesse call from across the courtyard, raised an arm to wave as if he wouldn’t see them unless he did, and turned to speak to his companion, the man whose arm was around his husband’s shoulders, the man who had Jesse’s other arm resting across his. “Come and meet Mami properly!”

Hanzo breathed in peace and went forth to meet his husband’s family. “Greetings and welcome, Commander Reyes, Commander Morrison.”

Jesse immediately left Reyes’ side to slide an arm around Hanzo’s waist, grinning happily as he swept a hand between the two. “Mami, husband. Husband, Mami.”

“Hey,” the tall, white-haired man following behind, who seemed to be slightly hampered in his movements by the way Beth and Lena each had claimed a side and seemed determined to not let him walk anywhere by himself ever again.

Jesse, without blinking, included him in the next sweep of his hand. “Dad, husband. Husband, Dad.”
“It is my pleasure to finally meet you.” The urge to bow was almost unbearably strong, but he succeeded in resisting it. “Please come in -- breakfast awaits and rest. I know you have traveled far to be here today.”

“It’s our pleasure to finally be here.” Commander Reyes flashed a quick smile, startlingly bright, even as he swept the entire area and everyone in it with the assessing gaze of a veteran killer-for-hire -- Hanzo wondered, with a faint prickle of unease, how many points of exploitable weakness he uncovered with that one look. “Relax, kid. I’m not going to eat you. If I wanted you dead, it would have been much more efficient to let nature take its course in Moldavia. I take it your recovery is going well?”

“Fully recovered, thank you.” The man did have a point. “I must thank you for that, Commander. Your assistance was invaluable.”

“Of course it was.” Hanzo, to his surprise, found himself being neatly separated from Jesse’s side and escorted into his own home with his mother-in-law’s hand in the small of his back. “We need to talk shop at some point but, well, if I don’t actually eat something soon my physiology is going to start digesting the furniture for a biomass replacement cycle. Let’s get to it.”

“Another orphan adopted,” he heard Genji mutter gleefully from behind them, then a whined grunt as someone clearly poked or nudged or elbowed him. “What was that for?”

“Karma,” Lena said sweetly, followed by the rumbled laugh of Commander Morrison.

“Weapons down before we hit the dinner table,” he said. “Let’s not have a repeat of the Great Thanksgiving Debacle of ’59, hm?”

“I still have shards of that porcelain turkey imbedded in my arm’s hardware,” Genji said.

“... And why did you not report that to me?” Beth, aggrieved. “You all are just determined to lock up my free time for the next couple of months with all the ways you’ve been abusing yourself without adult supervision.”

“Bets. Sweetie.” Nate interjected soothingly. “Just... relax and have some breakfast and then I will help you immobilize them all for a thorough probing and tuning and scrubbing. Promise. Cross my heart.”

Next to him, Commander Reyes shuddered melodramatically and muttered something under his breath in Spanish that made Jesse, on his other side, throw back his head and laugh. In the instant, something inside him that had persisted small and hard and cold cracked open, melted, fell away, and he was not sorry to see it go.

Jesse’s hand touched the small of his back as he politely pulled Hanzo’s chair out for him, and leaned in to nuzzle his cheek. “All good, darlin’?”

“Yes.” Hanzo leaned up and kissed him gently. “Better than I ever imagined it would be.”

Jesse’s eyes sparkled as he drew back, sat in his own chair beside him, and kissed his hand, just below the ring. “That’s the only way it goes from here on out,” he promised. “You’ll see.”

oOoOoOo

“You are,” Beth observed, guiding Gabe into the examination room in the clinic they’d finally finished converting over from the empty flat and unused adjoining retail space beside it, “objectively the world’s worst tiger mom, sir. How do I know if I’m disappointing you without
your steady criticism? How will I earn my gold star as a Chinese daughter without your grudging approval?"

“I’m sure if I hang out around here long enough I’ll find plenty of things to steadily criticize and grudgingly approve of and not just about you -- so give it time.” Gabe offered her a crooked smile. “I think I’ll consider World’s Worst Tiger Mom an improvement over World’s Biggest Asshole Mom.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive,” she said serenely, and tossed him a grin over her shoulder as she cleaned her hands and reached for the nitrile exam gloves. “Jury’s still out on the second one, but you’re clear of the Unforgivable Asshole title, at least.”

“Dare I ask who replaced me?” Gabe flicked a glance around the room, found it admirably secure, given its prior existence as a public access space.

“Have you met Hanzo’s mom?” There was something in her smile, something almost violent in its disapproval of the woman in question, backlit by the nanoglow as it began crawling through her skin to rouse equipment and holo-windows as she settled on a chair and wheeled towards him. “That’s who replaced you.”

“Not in person, no.” He fought back the urge to let his mouth stretch into something fangier and less obviously human. “If I had, we probably wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“At last,” Beth said dryly, flicking a hand and activating the long-dormant Blackwatch nanite gene-tags still technically part of his DNA makeup, pinging his internal systems with the appropriate codes to grant her medical access. “Something usefully positive she’s done since producing Genji. Any new medical history you want to tell me about before I find out about it, sir?”

“Well.” Phlegmatically. “I’m an undead nanobot abomination?”

She bestowed upon him a look that clearly said no shit, sir. “We’ve all been a little undead in our careers. What else?”

“My biomass replacement cycle has been a little… erratic lately. Normally it cycles at least once every seventy-two hours. In the last month, it’s cycled every other day for two weeks, then didn’t cycle at all for one.” A grimace. “I’ve been trying to look on the good side of that because feeling your entire body rot around you and reform sucks beyond the telling of it.”

“I can only imagine,” Beth said sympathetically, and opened his biometric feeds in a window hovering to her left. “Let’s take a look and see if we can’t figure out what’s going on.”

She ran test after test, poked and prodded him in ways that, were he a slightly different man, would have sent him running for a dark hole to crawl into, asked sharp and probing questions that grew ever-increasingly personal, until he thought they couldn’t get any more mortifyingly intimate.

He was oh so very tragically wrong.

“Have you and Jack had sex since you’ve gotten back together?” she asked, dragging up images and streams of what looked like his base nanocloud algorithms in one screen, and a complete body scan in another. “Specifically, any fluid exchange of semen or blood?”

“No. Not for, well, lack of interest or ability but --” Oh that sounded sane and rational in his head and significantly better, as well. “I have… difficulties retaining physical cohesion when my emotions are particularly labile.”
“Does Jack lose interest if you de-coalesce, or is it an aversion on your part?” Thank all the gods he’d stored in the Archive for the completely neutral Overwatch Medical-issued professional tone, and that she was not seeking eye contact, instead keeping her gaze firmly, slightly frownily, on her screens. “I’m not asking for shits and giggles, sir. There’s something… wrong with your codes here, and I really do need the answer to rule something out.”

“An aversion on mine.” Gabe took a deep, cleansing breath. “My physical form regularly tries to default back to a… significantly less pretty version of current. Hades thinks it’s some kind of dysphoria. I think he doesn’t actually have a degree in either psychology or medicine.”

“He’s not wrong, exactly,” Beth said slowly, hands nudging various points of data around and her expression growing more concerned by the moment. “But it’s not a natural disorder. Do you mind if I call in some help to figure this out, sir?”

“Not at all. Let’s get this sorted.” There was that deeply uncomfortable quivering in the chest again that would feel, if he were anyone or anything else, like nervousness.

“Psyche, would you mind pinging Zen and Nate and asking them to join me with the Commander, please?” Beth asked as she swiped her screens into the room’s diagnostic equipment and began tidying up extraneous equipment.

Not at all, Pacemaker, Psyche replied through the room’s sound system. A moment later, They are agreeable, and are on their way.

“Thank you, Psyche.” A glance his way then, her eyes softening and she laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I’m not going to let you fall apart, sir. We can’t guilt you about abandoning us for the rest of your life if you disintegrate for real.”

“Best daughter.” He brushed an imaginary tear from his eye. “I have taught you well.”

“Thank you, sir,” Beth said, false modesty ducking her head and spreading a shit-eating grin over her face in the process.

Ten minutes later, Gabe found himself left to his own devices as Beth clustered with Nate and “Zen”, who turned out to be a rather pleasantly constructed omnic Shambali monk. He wasn’t sure who Beth and Nate tried to avoid flustered-attracted-to-but-denying-it eye contact with more, each other, or the omnic, and that was a truly interesting development more than sufficient to distract him from his current uncertain and anxiety-inducing predicament.

“You’re seeing what I’m seeing, yeah?” Beth asked, glancing side-long at Nate, as they combed through the data together, and to Gabe’s perfectly trained and veteran eye, they avoided so much as inadvertently brushing hands as they manipulated the screens fluidly and naturally, like they’d been practicing to do so their entire lives. “You know what this is too.”

“Feedback drift inhibition failure. Yeah.” Nate pulled up a more detailed couple of layers of scan. “It’s causing autonomic system breakdown -- fault discovery and repair are pretty severely compromised.”

“Look at these cascades here,” she said, bringing up yet more screens and expanding them to some couple hundred magnifications, and a finger traced out something Gabe could neither see nor, frankly, comprehend from this angle. “Look at where it goes, right into the code functioning as pituitary replacement. Look what it’s doing to both his external cohesion and internal stability. This… is deliberate, Nate.”
“Yeah, I’m okay with signing on to that diagnosis.” He pulled an entire secondary workstation out of his cyberware, began transferring files. “Even stop-gap patching is going to eventually get sucked into that failure cycle but for now… gimme a couple hours to run ––”

“I’m not interested in stop-gap patching. I promised him eternal suffering for how he abandoned us, and I intend to deliver that promise.” She scrubbed her face. “This is a moot fucking point, because I know what answer you’re going to find, but tell me the signature.”

The sidelong look Nate shot her had layers of density and meaning that Gabe wasn’t quite sure yet how to interpret. “I’ll need to do a full analysis, but there’s some similarities between this and the nanosquirm we’ve got in containment in terms of pure complexity. I feel reasonably certain this is Angie’s work bootlegged and modified by someone lacking her rigorous sense of ethics. So, yeah, it’s fuckin’ Moira.”

“No just Angie’s work,” she said grimly, and enhanced another section. “Here’s his neural linkage and hormonal response pathways. Look familiar?”

“Your cyberneurological acclimation protocol. But. Not.” Nate frowned, pulled up another two screens, ran comparison. “It’s… fuck me. It’s not a pure inversion because that would probably defeat the purpose, but it’s definitely a deliberate instability generator. Neurochemical and neurological instability. A restraint mechanism?”

“My guess. I,” she said, eerily conversationally, “am going to fucking enjoy killing that amoral bitch.” And she covered her face with her hands, scrubbing briskly. From the circle of orbs rotating slowly around the thus-far silent omnic, two broke away from the pack, splitting apart to hover just above each of their heads. As he watched, Beth reached up absently and cradled hers to her cheek. Huh. That’s interesting. “What do you think, Zen?”

“At the risk of sounding excessively mystical—” The omnic, Zen, had the sort of voice that could belong equally well to a psychologist or a phone sex operator, “I believe the intent is to introduce deliberate psycho-physiological disharmony — the eventual dissolution of the ability to function under personal conscious volition. I have seen such things before in individuals who suffered direct sustained contact with unstable God Programs.” A pause. “Hades is not such a program. But this may be a prelude to priming instability in him, as well, should the feedback compromise his unique code.”

“I’m inclined to agree. There’s evidence of non-core repair programs being run at various intervals. I think it’s both. Keeps him coming back, keeps him under thumb.” Beth turned, looked at Gabe with an interesting mix of rage and determination and sympathy warring in her expression. “How long has it been since your last syscheck, sir?”

“... Eight months? Not quite a year.” Gabe physically resisted the urge to reach out and give her a comforting squeeze.

Oddly, she looked like she was resisting the same. “Everything’s been getting worse since?”

“Pragmatically? Yes. Really picking up speed in the last two months.” Gabe took a couple more deep, cleansing breaths. “This was inserted at my last check.”

Beth inhaled sharply, let it out slowly and nodded. She left the terminal and came over to sit with him again. “Okay,” she said, taking his hands in her own. “Do you want the good news or the bad news or the incredibly enraging news first?”

“Let’s do the head exploding bits first so the good news can help me pull myself back together.”
Her grip was oddly reassuring and so was the gentle chiming of the sphere -- orb -- whatever -- that took up station at his shoulder.

Her hands tightened. “D’you remember the early stages of Genji’s reconstruction, when his mind had issues internalizing the extensive cybernetic replacement and the standard issue acclimatization protocols weren’t working?”

“I do. Hard to forget that -- I’m pretty sure Jesse still has some scars.” And he did remember it, though it was a little fuzzy around the edges.

“Well, when we had to rewrite the protocols to account for the extent of the damage, the hormonal surges caused by his emotional responses and account for …” A wry smile. “A lot of stuff only us medical geeks understand, really. That protocol was largely mine, and I made a point to include it in the medical archives in Geneva, just in case we ran into another patient with extensive modifications who needed intensified interventions.” A delicate pause, her eyes searching his for a moment. “That protocol is now part of your code, only… it’s not meant to stabilize a goddamn thing. The safeguards have been removed, and the functionality has been deliberately altered. It’s not only fucking with your physical cohesion, it’s also screwing with your emotions. It’s not the only point of cascade failures in your nanocloud, sir, but it’s certainly a major contributing factor.”

“That… makes an unpleasant amount of sense.” The felt the corners of his mouth twitching involuntarily, the shape of his face trying to change, and he allowed it to lapse into his mask to spare himself the effort of trying to hold onto it, as rage and humiliation and betrayal and outrage and all sorts of other complex reactions he didn’t have the wherewithal to process at that exact moment attempted to tear him into an overwrought and seething nanocloud.

“You’re going to be seeing a lot of me in the future, sir.” Her hands, far smaller than his, were still doing a heroically impossible job of cradling his in an entirely empathetic and warm manner, and she pressed an orb into his fingers as she finally withdrew her own. “An awful lot.”

“The only good side?” Gabe asked dryly. “Acceptable.”

She flashed a sudden, delighted grin. “No, that was the bad news. The good news is, I think we can not only prevent further stability degradation, but fix the damage you’ve already suffered and restore control over your physical configuration by, what, Nate? At least seventy percent or thereabouts?”

“Seventy percent solid.” Nate held up a hand, made a little less/little more gesture, eyes still glued to his screens.

“We can even reset your base configuration from ‘something less than pretty’ to something considerably more pretty, if you like.” She reached up, and touched the edge of the mask. “You don’t have to hide, mama,” she said softly, a trifle hesitantly on the last word. “We’re not going to let you suffer this any longer, okay?”

“Okay.” He caught her hand. “But trust me when I tell you you don’t want to see what’s under this right now. And I’d settle for ‘not a charred corpse’ on the prettification scale.”

“I’m a Valkyrie, sir,” she said, unruffled, and let her hand be easily removed by his. “I don’t scare easily, and I’m almost impossible to disgust or revolt. Trust me when I say I think the mask is more for you than for me, and that’s okay. We’ll get there.”

“I believe we will, Commander Liu.” It took a moment to force his voice steady. “I honestly do.”
“There is definitely something to be said about having a man that strong helping you move,” Meilin confided to Hanzo, as she returned for another box to carry over to her new home, in Lian’s flat. “He has nearly single handedly managed to bring all of the old furniture down to the recycling center in the span of an hour, and most of the time, Saori and her friends were either sitting on it or on him as he did so. It’s quite an impressive sight.”

“Thank you,” Jack said smugly, grinning at her from under his visor as she blushed and ducked her head and tried to hide behind Hanzo, and set the boxes of brand new, just picked out, assemble-at-home standing cabinetry he was carrying just inside the kitchen door. “I try to impress. Glad to know I’ve still got it.”

“You will not have it.” Meilin shot back primly, recovering marvelously though she still had a heavy blush in her cheeks, “unless you stop avoiding Doctor Liu and have your physical. Your ability to work depends on her clearance.”

“And we were having such a nice time,” Jack said with a dramatic sigh. “Fine. I’ll see her this afternoon. Satisfied?”

“Quite.” And head high, Meilin exited the room like an empress, while Jack shook his head and chuckled.

“We are thinking of officially naming her base commander,” Hanzo admitted, wryly, as he laid out the tools they would need to assemble all the still-packed furniture scattered about the flat's common space. “She organizes my life.”

“She’s got that vibe to her,” Jack agreed, laying his visor aside and navigating carefully to the refrigerator, where he reached in and came back with a six-pack of cranberry-lime spritzer instead of the beer he’d expected, which he stared at for a moment before throwing an accusatory glance at Hanzo. “Your husband’s an asshole,” he informed him, but opened a can and drank it as if it were beer anyway. “I blame his mother for that.”

“Admittedly, he has his moments.” Hanzo agreed and accepted a can of his own. “But to give him the credit he deserves, he wishes you both to be safe and healthy and to live long enough to -- to see what we are attempting to accomplish here come to fruition.”

“I should be offended that you’re more afraid of Gabe than you are of me,” he said, pulling out a chair from the kitchen table most recently assembled, and sitting gingerly in it. When it proved stable to hold his weight, he relaxed against it, slouching back comfortably. “I should be, but I won’t be. I’ve long accepted that, of the two of us, I’m the one everyone thinks is made of marshmallow fluff and chewy nougat.”

“You do have a somewhat more personable manner. Also, you were on all the recruitment posters.” Hanzo stood up, thoroughly searched the apartment for eavesdroppers, and admitted, “…I kept all the ones that turned up in Hanamura. For years.”

He grinned and swigged from his juice again, relishing almost despite himself the sweet-tart burn of it on the way down. “You had a crush on me,” he said, and let just a little bit of a gleeful cackle underscore the words. “That’s delightful. I take it you haven’t told Jesse this.”

“No. He would never in a thousand lifetimes let me live it down. Or Genji for that matter.” He sliced open a package of Scandinavian flatpack furniture with an unpronounceable name and extracted the instruction sheet. “I suppose everyone dreams of being a hero when they are a child.”
“I wanted to be a farmer,” Jack replied, and finished his spritzer, leaving the empty can on the table as he abandoned his chair in favor of sitting on the floor and sliding out the wooden boards clearly labeled with letters, then to begin laying them out in alphabetical order. “Technically, I already was a farmer, but I didn’t want to stop being a farmer.”

“One cannot quarrel with the honor of following one’s family profession.” Hanzo replied, entirely cognizant of the irony, and found the hardware bags, also clearly labeled with corresponding letters.

“Ma wouldn’t hear of it,” Jack said, and smiled in a way that suggested both nostalgia and the pain of old loss. “Mom wanted to let me figure out what I wanted to do for myself, but Ma put her foot down. She wanted me to get out and experience the world before I signed on for a lifetime of working our family land. So I joined the army instead.”

“I would have liked your mothers, I think.” Hanzo offered quietly, dithered over reaching out, decided that keeping his hands to himself was still the better part of valor.

“Neither one of them had a cruel bone in their bodies.” A pause, then his head tilted. “Gabe and I were lucky like that. We came from good people. I understand—” And he gestured around at the apartment with a wry smile and a flick of his wrist. “—we’re getting this place from someone who wasn’t quite as fortunate.”

“Yes.” Hanzo breathed peace, forced the sudden tension in his neck and shoulders to loosen. “Meilin’s grandfather, Jiao, was… not a pleasant person. And, unknown to me, a local member of the Shimada-gumi who never shed the affiliation. These might not be entirely unrelated.”

Jack nodded, pulled another can of spritzer from the package, and offered it out to Hanzo before taking his second. “And where is this pillar of the community currently? Somewhere sufficiently distant, I assume?”

“Nourishing the wildlife on the bottom of the harbor, I believe. That was the plan that Meilin and the Old Men -- Tieh and Zheng -- agreed upon.” He accepted the offering. “Since this was his flat, she elected to donate it to the cause. We swept it quite thoroughly for any untoward bits of technology that you might find unwelcome, I assure you.”

Jack waved a hand in casual dismissal. “I never worry about that,” he says in amusement. “Gabe is never satisfied until he’s seen for himself every nook and cranny he’d conceivably tuck a bug so it wouldn’t be noticed. His meticulous paranoia enables my own personal laziness.” He took a long drink from the can. “Time for a break, I think. C’mon. Let’s go.”

“As you wish.” Hanzo rose and dusted off his hands. “Have you a destination in mind?”

“You,” Jack informed him as he heaved himself to his feet, “are gonna go get your bow, and I’m gonna go get my gun, and then we’re going to have a proper chat over target practice.” His grin was easy, and recalled something of one decorating the posters Hanzo’d kept in his room. “If you can outshoot me, I’ll answer any question you want to ask me about your brother, your husband, or your new mother-in-law.”

Hanzo inclined a single brow. “If?”

“You’re good, kid. I’m better. You’re gonna need to work for it.”

“Very well,” Hanzo smiled his most serene and terrifying smile. “You are on.”

oOoOoOo
Jesse took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he settled his palm on the scanner beside the door, and waited while it debated if it wanted to let him in or not. Everything was finally up and running, but no matter how much Nate assured him there were no more glitches he could find, he wasn’t quite ready to trust that after having all the hair singed off his arm the other week in an electrical short.

_You’re jumpier than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockin’ chairs_, Charon observed, a little smugly, a lot amused. _Ain’t you been training for this all your life?_

“Not the point,” Jesse murmured as the door finally opened and let him into the heart of the new Blackwatch organization, the operations and control hub from which everything would flow. “Point is I’m doin’ it now.”

Yeah. Yeah, you are. Feels good, don’t it?

“Shut up,” Jesse said, but couldn’t keep the small grin off his face. “Lecto, darlin’, you ready to kick everything over and shake off the newness?”

“I am, Commander.” Alecto replied, her icon blinking to life in the main holo-tank. “Running systems check and start up now.”

Jesse folded his arms, eyes on the screen as she ran her checks, and tried not to feel the weight of responsibility crash down on his shoulders as he watched the data stream by. “Did Icebreaker get done with that global scan for active and dormant Blackwatch transponders?”

A screen blinked open and the lists scrolled, side by side -- more dormant, point in fact, than active, not unexpected for a bunch of people who had lived their professional lives on the shady and paranoid side of the law.

Jesse read the names one by one, grinning fondly at most, and didn’t fight the surge of nostalgia that rose as memories associated with each one roused in his mind. “Ping ‘em all with comm codes, darlin’. Anyone who answers with the right response, send ‘em the invite home.”

“Executing.” The comm system hummed to life, transponder pings lighting up on a little holographic display of the globe that Alecto helpfully provided because she was becoming a complete smartass that way. Frankly, he blamed long-term contact with Nate.

The first reply came back twenty minutes later, the next a few seconds after that, both in Las Vegas, agents Maakheru and Moonlight, together as always and he could just imagine the hijinx they were getting into on the Strip. A few minutes after that, Irunmole checked in from Rwanda, with a mobile hospital identity tag. Backtrace, formerly of Analysis, tagged in from some hole-in-the-wall that even he had never heard of in central Asia and Skipjack from Dubrovnik with a note that the weather was perfect, the beaches were awesome, and also inquiring about the status of Jesse’s bounty, because of course she did, the asshole. Session, Friction, and Pathfinder, three more of Beth’s Nerd Herd replied within seconds of each other, all in Numbani, with university faculty identity markers appended.

Biofeed and Lektralyt, both Valkyrie-trained medics, came back last, their tags signalling their locations as southern California for the first, and Cyprus for the second, and just for a moment, he envied Lektra her pristine Mediterranean beaches and Riley his warm Pacific waves.

“Keep an ear on the ones who didn’t respond. As for the rest? Bring ‘em home, Alecto,” he said, and leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed behind his head. “We got work to do.”
“Your home is as lovely as ever, Lady Shimada.”

The western woman spoke Japanese with only the slightest trace of accent, a faint lilt that tagged all her words and made them sound a little odd but not unpleasant. Emiko approved of that, abstractly, as she served a late afternoon meal on the balcony overlooking the western garden, where the maples were slowly reddening with the turning of the year, the early autumn sunlight still rich and warm. It caught in their guest’s own ludicrously orange hair, glinted on the cybernetic relays surrounding one of her odd-colored eyes and etched into the surface of her long-fingered hands.

“You are too kind, Dr. O’Deorain. I know that my humble home cannot compare to the grandeur of the Oasis.” The Lady smiled demurely and accepted the cup that Emiko poured for her. “I am, however, grateful that you accepted my invitation.”

“It seemed fitting, given the circumstances.” Dr. O’Deorain offered the Lady a gracious inclination of her head, a gesture that greatly enhanced her resemblance to a predatory insect waiting to strike. “It is not every day that I am given the opportunity to discuss the development of a first grandchild with a valued colleague.”

Emiko could not completely repress a shiver but covered it by filling the Lady’s soup bowl. Lady Shimada concealed her own audible catch of breath in a sip of her tea. “The matter proceeds as we discussed?”

“It does.” The doctor gestured and a holo display sprang to life at her fingertips. “I selected the three strongest embryos that survived the initial culture. Of those three, I selected the one that presented with the optimal combination of desired genetic traits following the engineering processes and began maturation in a uterine replication module.” Biotelemetric data streamed up the screen, along with process notes, still images, snippets of video, the child in development within its artificial womb. “I did not select for sex, per your orders. The fetus is female.”

Lady Shimada set down her cup with admirably steady hands. “How long will the process require?”

“Five months, give or take a few days. The maturation process moves more quickly than standard pregnancy.” Dr. O’Deorain replied dryly. “But even science can only rush so much important physiological development without consequences. At this rate, I will still be able to adjust any spontaneous difficulties that might arise.”

“Very well,” Lady Shimada agreed. “And the other surviving embryos?”

“Cryogenically preserved. The remaining initial genetic material, as well.” Dr. O’Deorain smiled and Emiko had to resist the urge to scuttle back a pace. “Such a large home seems so… empty, without the patter of little feet, does it not?”

“I have felt so, yes.” Lady Shimada admitted, after a moment of perfect, glacial silence. “May I have a copy of this data?”

“Of course.” The doctor silently requested permission to access the castle’s communication systems, a request that was granted. “There you are. I will, of course, provide periodic updates during the course of the maturation process and will inform you immediately if anything untoward occurs.”
“Thank you again, Dr. O’Deorain.” Lady Shimada bowed from the shoulders. “You have given me hope where I thought none existed.”

“You are entirely welcome, Lady Shimada.” Dr. O’Deorain smiled and Emiko resisted the urge to scuttle again. “By your leave?”

“Of course. You have much urgent business to attend to.” Lady Shimada gestured her concurrence, and the holoprojection blinked out. Almost instantly, her communications tablet was in her hands, accessing the information Dr. O’Deorain had downloaded.

Emiko, silent and efficient, went about serving the rest of her lady’s meal, and kept her thoughts far away from both her face and her lips.

**oOoOoOo**

“*That was oddly satisfying.*” Moira O’Deorain unfolded herself from where she knelt on a handful of floor pillows, to spare her knees the horrors of dealing with Lady Shimada’s sense of aesthetics and propriety. “And the shortest conversation I’ve ever had with her. She seems pleased, at least.”

“You just gave her everything she desired,” Tschernovog murmured from the internal laboratory communications panel, as she stretched the kinks out of her back and made her way out of the cubby she called her office. “Of course she’s pleased.”

“And she helpfully refrained from asking about the other parent. So good of her.” The uterine replication modules occupied their own little subdivision of the lab proper, shielded from physical observation and potential damage by a hard light barrier helpfully provided by her colleagues in Vishkar, isolated from the Oasis’ own data exchange networks, continuously monitored by a guardian that knew no exploitable human weaknesses.

Tisiphone’s icon sprang to life as she passed the enclosure threshold, scans passing through her cybernetics and geneprint, confirming her identity. *Welcome, doctor. The children have entered their next evolution cycle, per your directives.*

“So I see.”

Little Dragoneye floated, buoyed in a cushion of amniotic-replacement nutrient fluid, her readings nominal as Tisiphone fed them through the bond they shared. Next to her, Soldier:100, slightly younger by a matter of days, displayed a few quirks that might require adjustment -- or might not, depending on the circumstances. Akande had a taste for chaos, and an appreciation for results, even if the process used to achieve them was a touch messy. She would know better what needed to be done when the current cycle finished out.

“Tisiphone, my dear, open a communications channel to Director Ogundimu. He should also know the status of our current endeavors…”

As she waited for the line to connect, Moira examined the fetuses in the light from the glowing amniotic liquids. They were just big enough now to see with the naked eye, tiny cell bundles of limitless opportunity and untapped potential. She tucked her hands behind her back, and *smiled*. 

*End Notes*
ficilicious on Tumblr: @allthemarvelousrage

Nagaina on Tumblr: @solivar

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!