Old Habits

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Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: F/F, F/M, M/M
Fandom: Overwatch (Video Game)
Relationship: Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison/Reaper | Gabriel Reyes, Jesse McCree/Hanzo Shimada, Fareeha "Pharah" Amari/Angela "Mercy" Ziegler, Ana Amari/Reinhardt Wilhelm, Genji Shimada/Tekhartha Zenyatta, only the Reaper76 is the main ship, the others are largely background ships
Character: Reaper | Gabriel Reyes, Widowmaker | Amélie Lacroix, Sombra (Overwatch), Soldier: 76 | Jack Morrison, Jesse McCree, Winston (Overwatch), Lena "Tracer" Oxton, Fareeha "Pharah" Amari, Angela "Mercy" Ziegler, Genji Shimada, Tekhartha Zenyatta, Reinhardt Wilhelm, Ana Amari, Satya "Symmetra" Vaswani, Roadhog | Mako Rutledge, Junkrat | Jamison Fawkes, Bastion (Overwatch), Torbjörn Lindholm, Brigitte (Overwatch), Background & Cameo Characters, Background Original Characters, don't get attached to the OCs, Hanzo Shimada, sorry I forgot you hanzo, And now including, Moira O'Deorain
Additional Tags: Action/Adventure, Canon-Typical Violence, Redemption, Team as Family, Angst and Humor, Fluff and Humor, Swearing, lots of swearing, Slow Burn, Conspiracy, Mystery, Relationship(s), Intense, at times - Freeform, alright personal tags, Team Talon Redemption fic, Soldier: 76 conspiracy plot, the slowest Reaper76 burn ever, the slowest Ana Amari redemption fic ever, Bad Puns, dumb humor, occasional sexual humor, possible warnings: References to Depression, References to PTSD, Don't worry if your favorite character isn't tagged, they will show up in due time
Series: Part 2 of And Overwatch For All
Stats: Published: 2017-04-08 Completed: 2017-09-15 Chapters: 30/30 Words: 281661

Old Habits

by clickclickBANG

Summary

[Sometimes]

“It’s done. I’m not gonna be a Talon agent, but I’ll join you.” Reaper never takes his eyes off Widowmaker. With easy motions, she vaults off the balcony and lands before him. He watches her as she saunters up to him, putting her rifle on her shoulder. Dead and distant, she smiles, "Salut, Reaper."
[When the closest bonds break] They can try to change it, modify it, make it easier for a normal soldier, but it won’t work. He knows. The heavy pulse rifle had been made for him. Behind the visor Jack smiles. Add this to the list of “things that will help him destroy the world.” And god, he’s gonna feel great while doing it.

[All you can do] Gabriel’s wearing a stylized skull mask, the eyes dark, the cheeks hollow - shells and carrier containers strapped across his chest and hips. He’s still twirling the shotguns in his hands, when - (He stops, because there’s a figure in the south tunnel - their face masked in reds, hefting a heavy pulse rifle, left hand raised to their visor -)

He stops. And Jack stops. And even though neither of them can actually see the other’s face they make eye contact.

[Is pray you stay out of the crossfire.]
Alright so now that I'm not DYING, I can get into this a bit more:

MASSIVE, MASSIVE LOVE to my beta readers for putting up with my often inane ramblings and sometimes disjointed writing. Thank you guys for sticking with me through this monster of a fic and for being so patient with me. You guys are great and really a huge reason for why I keep working on this.

THANK YOU to everyone who has given me compliments and kudos and bookmarks! I'm so excited to finally share my dumb "longass fic" with everyone. I hope you find it as entertaining as I do! I've tagged it for ships but it's really almost entirely an action-adventure story. The romantic aspects do get revealed slowly but surely.

I'd like to think that if you enjoy playing the game, or if you enjoy stuff like "Red vs Blue," "RWBY," "Fullmetal Alchemist," various Marvel films, etc, that you'll enjoy this. For those of you who liked "How We Were Made," this fic is basically that but drawn out into 30 chapters. You'll get a lot more sarcastic, sassy, snarky, smiling Reaper/Gabriel Reyes and a lot more sarcastic, silly, skeptical, smartass Soldier: 76/Jack Morrison, along with "I don't get paid enough for this" Widowmaker/Amélie Lacroix and "I'm part of the problem" Sombra.

The current plan is to update every Thursday or Friday. If need be, I may update multiple times during the week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Be it shield, gun, or stitches, we will help those who cannot help themselves. We can make a difference. We are hope. We are honor. We are courage. We are justice.

We were all those things once.

Once.

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[Five years after the disbandment of Overwatch, a mercenary called “Reaper” is approached by Talon agents -]

“That’s a pretty limp-noodled way of describing it, but okay sure.”
Five years after the disbandment of Overwatch, a mercenary called “Reaper” is surrounded by Talon agents."

"Whoa, hey, don’t misconvey it now - sure it was dramatic, but you make it sound like they had me cornered, which totally did NOT happen."

..."Really? ‘Confronted’ is the best you got here? And why is the focus on Talon anyways - I was the one actually doing my renegade revenge business thing, they were just following me around like baby pumas and - hey, wait, where are you going? Who’s going to write the introduction?"

"...Guess I’ll take a crack at it. I’ve read enough King. My aesthetic game is wicked sharp, like, literally. And Jack always said I was the funniest person in Overwatch."

"No, I didn’t."

"...Okay, but you thought it though. Same difference - I basically know all your thoughts anyways."

"...I mean, you’re not wrong."

"Alright, tater tots, let’s try punching a couple of shotgun pellets into this puppy."

"Holy hell, phrasing, Gabe."

Five years after the utter collapse and annihilation of Overwatch, the rogue badass mercenary called "Reaper" was perfectly fine, in the middle of doing his bad boss thing, when shit hit the fan. He was about to put a blast of hot shotgun plasma and molten pellets into some corrupt CEO’s skull when the Talon squad shadowing him decided to take a couple of crack shots at him through the window of the CEO’s office.

"I was getting bored just watching you posture and saunter about, salaud."

"I was not posturing and sauntering, you spider ballerina you - you’re just jealous because your sniper rifle is not nearly as sick as my shotguns - don’t roll your eyes at me, Widowmaker."

"Tell them that they should just skip this and go to chapter one for the more accurate version, mon ami."

"I’m in the middle of writing the introduction summary crazy cool inside-jacket-of-the-hardcover-duster hook thing."

"...Are you, though, Gabe? That cursor is just sitting there, not typing anything."

"Get off my back, Jack, I’m trying my best here."

..."I was not posturing and sauntering, you spider ballerina you - you’re just jealous because your sniper rifle is not nearly as sick as my shotguns - don’t roll your eyes at me, Widowmaker."

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"...Are you, though, Gabe? That cursor is just sitting there, not typing anything."

"Get off my back, Jack, I’m trying my best here."
“This is your best?”

“Li’l known secret - the boss ain’t never wrote them Blackwatch reports. I did all o’ them.”

“Don’t even try to lie about that, boy - and when did you get here??”

“Oh, I been sittin’ here, drinkin’ my tea, watchin’ y’all bicker like six hens in a five-nest chicken coop.”

“...There aren’t even six of us here, what.”

“Jesse, you grew up in a motorcycle gang - have you ever held a chicken?”

“Sure have, Soldado Papito - I get like one o’ them pre-cooked rotisserie chickens like once a week.”

“Mira, I am trying to write here, douchenozzles!”

[Five years after the utter collapse and annihilation of Overwatch, the rogue badass mercenary called “Reaper” was perfectly fine, in the middle of doing his bad boss thing, when shit hit the fan. He was about to put a blast of hot shotgun plasma and molten pellets into some corrupt CEO’s skull when the Talon squad shadowing him decided to take a couple of crack shots at him through the window of the CEO’s office. After a brief tango and a blur of shotgun pellets, Reaper decides to let the poor suckers live and listens to their suggestion that he join their organization. He’s not particularly enthralled with the idea, but a certain sniper in the group catches his attention. When he recognizes her as a ghost from Overwatch’s past, he accepts the offer to cooperate with Talon, and begins unraveling a long, deep, super complex mystery that seems to move the larger, seemingly disparate forces that connect the world together.]

[Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the more interesting conspiracy and more intriguing protagonist finally show up in Chapter 3 -]

“...You always did have a high opinion of yourself, Jack, but god damn -”

“...Okay, how’s this?”

[Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the vigilante soldier who is totally not as cool nor as badass nor as amazing as the rogue mercenary starts to uncover a not nearly as interesting conspiracy deep on the files of Watchpoint: Grand Mesa -]

“I mean, better, but damn, Jack, you don’t gotta drag yourself that hard -”

“Aww, Gabe, I’d rather you drag me real hard instead -”

“Oh, uh...Won’t say no to that now -”

“Aaaaand this cowboy’s out for the count, folks. Don’t gotta see these two old dudes get like this.
Ain’t this supposed to be a slow burn too? What the hell…”

“Well, so unlike the vaquero, I’m sticking around because someone has to do something about this mess -”

“Sombra, when the hell did you get here?”

“...Been here all along, boss.”

“Ah...Your invisibility cloak. Got it.”

“...No, I’ve just been sitting here watching this disaster unfold by people the world considers ‘heroes’...”

“Uh, perdón muchacha, but I’m an anti-hero. I don’t appreciate you lumping me in with aging-Captain America-who-robbed-a-76 over here.”

“I’m not a hero - not anymore. And I don’t need the edgy reboot of Skeletor on my team anyways.”

“...I wear skintight black leather though, Jack.”

“Oh trust me, Gabe, I’m very aware of how tightly your clothes fit you -”

“Alright, I’m stopping this nonsense right now - ¡Venga!”

[Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the vigilante soldier (who is pretty lost and dense about the conspiracy that destroyed his old organization finds several much-needed clues in the emails of Watchpoint: Grand Mesa. Little does he know that a feared, shadowy hacker is feeding him breadcrumbs to lead him right to the dangerous work she doesn’t want to risk handling alone -)]

“While Sombra’s version is technically correct, I do believe she is missing many critical and important details in her representation of the situation...”

“Oh look, the talking monkey is here to give us The Scientifically Correct Report on things.”

“Right, because - what was it - ah, yes, ‘rogue badass mercenary’ clearly captures exactly who you are, Commander Reyes - never mind the fact that you’re some sort of ‘Soul Eater’ OC who got out of control...”

“I do not want to hear that from a Sun Wukong knock-off.”

“WHEN ES IT MY TURN TO TELL ZE STORY”

“Holy shit, Reinhardt - where the hell did you come from??”

“ZE SECRET PASSAGEWAY ES VERY STEALTHY”

“Why haven't you put a tranq dart in him yet, Ana?”

“...And why would I put a tranq dart in my beautiful knight, Jack?”

“Some of us still like our eardrums, Ana.”
“Some of us also like hearing Reinhardt’s wonderful voice, Jack.”

“...You’re dating again, aren’t you?”

“...He called me ‘lovely,’ Jack. I am weak -”

“Amari, por favor - have some self-respect -”

“Gabriel, I do not want to hear about self-respect from the man who got wound up by his partner’s self-drags.”

“...Jack’s self-deprecating humor is hilarious though...”

“...Araña, how did Overwatch ever manage to function?”

“...Not very well, cherie.”

“Can I get back to writing the synopsis of my cool hacker spy thriller novel?”

“I do not care.”

“That’s my favorite spider!”

“Oh, no, you don’t. Sombra - I’m the protagonist, I get to write the synopsis!”

“You’re not the only protagonist here, Gabe -”

“Technically, there are as many protagonists as there are perspectives! And life is all about perspective!”

“Thank you, Chief Scientist Obvious.”

“Well, Gabe, it’s almost like every single person has a slightly different story to tell...But these stories only make sense when we all tell them together -”

“Not you too, Jack. I thought you were done with this idealistic bs.”

“But Gabe, you of all people should know that every person is the protagonist of their own story and every villain is the hero of their own adventure. And after all -”

[“The world could always use more heroes.”]

“...Yeah, screw this peace-loving nonsense - I’m going back to taking names and kicking asses.”

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[Five years after the disbandment of Overwatch, stories set deep under the surface of history begin to move, shift, coalesce, and collide.]

[A rogue mercenary called “Reaper” decides to cooperate with Talon - but his true interest is in understanding what happened to the sniper who looks a lot like the ghost of a ballerina he once called a friend. He finds himself sinking into a strange world, its axis tilted between revenge and redemption. With a painful, almost brutal slowness, he begins to ask questions he knows he might]
never find answers to. He knows he might be burned over and over and over while searching for them, but *damn*, if he isn’t gonna look badass while doing it.]

[Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a vigilante called “Soldier: 76” breaks into Watchpoint: Grand Meas and finds clues of a conspiracy that has woven a mesh so fine around the globe that it can hardly be seen. He also finds a pretty kickass gun. Geared with a visor he built himself, securing his brand new heavy pulse rifle, and struggling with a heart still broken, he tries to find ways to make the pieces fit again, though he knows he’ll cut himself on the edges of the glass over and over and over. But still, he must try.]

[Somewhere in the shadows, a hacker named “Sombra” begins to make her moves - her collection of pawns, adventurers, bounty hunters, soldiers, and reapers has grown large enough that she can finally begin playing the game. But as she walks the line between her unique sense of justice and her love for power, she may find herself walking right into a trap she herself had a hand in creating. Can she follow the shadows down into the truth, or will she be hunted the whole way?]

[Sitting close to the center of the web, yet stuck in her own mind a whole world away, the sniper deemed “Widowmaker” finds herself at a loss for what to do with her new “associate” Reaper. She does not know, she does not know, she does not know if she can trust him or if his anger will burn the both of them to ashes. The whispers of lost spiders in her head tell her to stand strong, stand strong, but how can she stand strong when the web beneath her begins to snap free?]

[Old knights and ghosts suddenly find themselves alive again in the dense forests around Eichenwalde. A bounty hunter named “the Masked Shrike” searches for a way to protect those closest in physicality and furthest in spirit from her. Her vision and abilities are not what they once used to be, but she must still level her aim towards friends and foes alike if she is going to brave the living nightmare coming for her loved ones.]

[Two assassin brothers start on separate paths, each one seeking answers to questions they had forgotten in their angers. The younger walks a fine line between harmony and discord, looking for clues in a place that touts itself as peaceful. The elder seeks out redemption in every shot he takes, but his true intentions remain hidden behind stormclouds and stormbows. Both of them carry more answers than anyone realizes, but neither of them know the questions being asked.]

[Which are harder to break - old habits, or old hearts?]

[Every protagonist has a perspective. Every perspective tells a story.]

[The world could always use more stories.]

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Hey y’all - this is the revamped information page for “Old Habits!”

There were mixed opinions on the first form of the Information page - some people genuinely loved it, and others genuinely disliked it. Both opinions were and are fair. In a perfect world, a lot of this information would be in some sort of appendix type-thing that a reader could reference as they choose, but since AO3 doesn’t work like that, we’re stuck with this kinda weird hybrid system.

To clear a few things up: **READING THIS PAGE IS NOT NECESSARY.**
If you got to this point and are already getting bored, I’d recommend scrolling to a “Next Chapter” button and just launching yourself right into the story. You won’t miss much here. But if you’re the kind of person who enjoys, well, reading the appendices at the back of fantasy and sci-fi novels, then this stuff is here for you. That’s all this is.

Some of the disclaimers from last time:

**The main ship is Reaper76** (Gabriel/Jack), but there are implied ships of Anahardt (Ana/Reinhardt), McHanzo (Jesse/Hanzo), Pharmarcy (Fareeha/Angela), and Genyatta (Genji/Zenyatta). Platonic/familial relationships include a father(s)-son relationship between Gabriel/Jack and Jesse, a sibling-type relationship between Winston and Athena, a mentor-mentee relationship between Reinhardt and Brigitte, a strange sibling/working relationship between Mako and Jamison, another strange sibling/working relationship between Satya and Hanzo, and a massive “team as family” system between the entire Overwatch cast, particularly the Strike team.

**There will be no explicit sexual content in this fic.** I can almost guarantee you I will only really be writing related sexual content for Reaper76 and no other ships. Explicit sexual content connected to this fic will be posted individually for separate “enjoyment” (yall know who you are - but I ain’t judging, because this is exactly how I am too, lol). There will be fluffy “shippy” content written for other ships. Those will be posted separately too.

**Potentially distressing content: Depression, anxiety, PTSD, depersonalization** - I want to say something very, very clearly: **There are no major character deaths planned for this fic or any others I write.** Perhaps that is “spoiling” my own content, but I want everyone who is interested in my writing to rest assured that you will never have to read something that ends in death. That said, in certain moments I write from a very personal, very emotional place and draw from personal experience, and I have had both of my current beta readers say that some of the scenes that are emotionally intense touch on very raw, very real nerves. I’m not saying this to brag, but just to supply a warning. I plan on tagging potentially distressing chapters with notes in the beginning so if you wish to skip over that stuff for the funnier parts or the action scenes, you will have the ability to do so.

This does not mean there are “no deaths” - background “cannon-fodder” characters die constantly. I would say that if you can handle things like the Pharah, McCree, Ana, or Old Soldiers comics, or the Hero or Infiltration animations, you can handle the “background deaths.” I consider all of this to be part of “canon typical violence.”

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**Other Handy Info:**

**Talon Network:**

A global terrorism network being run by unknown individuals “at the top.” No one knows the group’s exact motives. Talon is not based on any real-world terrorism group or organization (that should be almost immediately apparent).

**Canon background characters with almost no real information!**:

1. Gabrielle Adawe: called “the Under-Secretary-General” of the United Nations during the Omnic Crisis, she is “a key architect” in developing and establishing Overwatch. In Old Habits, she is approximately 68 years old at the start of the fic, and currently lives in Numbani. Her country of origin in Nigeria
2. Sanjay Korpai: Only depicted as Satya’s boss in Vishkar, here Sanjay is given the title of “Lead Design Architech.” He currently works in the Numbani branch, securing contracts there for new building projects.

3. Guillermo Portero: the CEO of LumériCo and a recent president of Mexico. Portero was a military figure during the Crisis. In Old Habits, he is the commander of Mexico’s “Fifth Military Zone” (the Gulf Coast states) during the Crisis, and the first person to recognize the importance of the Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant.

4. Ingrid Lindholm: literally does not have a name (3/3/2018 edit: SHE HAS A NAME)! In Old Habits, Ingrid is Angela’s aunt on her father’s side. Ingrid is a nurse that Overwatch met during their European battles, and she began a relationship with Torbjörn shortly after meeting him.

Omnic God Programs: The primary “antagonists” of the Omnic Crisis, the God Programs were a group of “Super AIs” with unique abilities that could alter the flow of a battle. They required massive power sources and computer systems to sustain them. The first person to develop tactics to properly counter them was American Supersoldier: 127 - Gabriel Reyes. The Overwatch Strike Team’s main mission was to capture and quarantine God Programs in something called “waking isolation” - a special state of quantum computing that trapped AI entities as “massive” as the God Programs in a mindnumbing emptiness for near eternity. All members of the Strike Team, including Gabrielle Adawe, considered this inhumane.

1. Anubis: the Omnic God Program from Cairo depicted in Pharah’s comic “Mission Statement.” During the Omnic Crisis, Anubis was captured and put in waking isolation. As part of the Human-Omnic Accord Act negotiations, Anubis was released from “waking isolation” and permitted to begin “rehabilitation.” Anubis is currently in “rehabilitation confinement” by Helix Securities in the Temple of Anubis in Giza, Egypt. Presently, Anubis is the only “canon” God Program. God Ability: Mind-control.

2. Mokosh (“Mother Goddess”): the Omnic God Program from Siberia. Mokosh was by far the most notorious of all the God Programs during the Crisis - for a long period of time, she gained control over 30% of Russia’s land through her network of Central Cores. After much effort, Russia pushed her back and forced her to “go dormant.” In an effort to destroy every trace of her, the Russian forces destroyed the majority of her Omnium, with Jack and Gabriel “saving” the last offline Omnis and sending them to Mondatta. Mondatta was Mokosh’s protege and her “first medical officer” before giving up violence and war altogether. It is not know how she survived the destruction of her Omnium. God Ability: Unknown

3. Quetzalcoatl (“Feathered Serpent”): the Omnic God Program from Mexico. Like his namesake, Quetzalcoatl struck like a snake early on in the Crisis, quickly moving forces from his Omnium near Texcoco into Mexico City, rapidly destroying the Federal Government and the Federal District Armed Forces. With the loss of Mexico’s central leadership, the energy infrastructures collapsed, resulting in the event known as “La Medianoche.” Portero spent much of his war efforts pushing Quetzalcoatl’s forces back and reclaiming territory westward from Dorado. God Ability: Power Control. Unique Omnic Forces: Quetzal Scout Units

4. Ryuujin (“Dragon God”): the Omnic God Program from Fujiwara, Japan. Similar to Quetzalcoatl, Ryuujin made a quick move on Tokyo, using his submersible Omnic forces to launch a surprise attack through the bay. With the collapse of the Japanese government, and no aid from Japan’s long-standing ally the United States, Japan rapidly fell into a state of lawlessness, with yakuza empires spreading to fill the void. A pseudo-form of feudalism was adopted until the Shimada-gumi cemented its power in central Japan. Ryuujin seemingly “disappeared” in the middle of the Crisis, and the Fujiwara Omnium surrendered soon after that. It is unknown what happened to the God Program, but Overwatch and Blackwatch heavily suspected that the Shimada-gumi has him contained somewhere. God Ability: “Tide-Changing Jewel.” Unique Omnic Forces: Sea Serpents
5. Kehci Manito (“Great Spirit”): the Omnic God Program from Detroit, Michigan. Kehci Manito ruled the region around the Great Lakes for several years before combined Overwatch-U.S.-Canadian forces managed to enclose in on the Omnium. Kehci Manito was difficult to capture to their shapeshifting abilities and their ability to manipulate electronic waves. Kehci Manito was captured by Overwatch and put in confinement for many years, until they were released as part of the Human-Omnic Accord Act negotiations. Kechi Manito is currently one of the God Programs that oversees Numbani. God Ability: Shape-shifting/EMP disruptions.

Unique Omnic Forces: Thunderbirds

6. Anansi (“Spider”): the Omnic God Program from Ibadan, Nigeria. Anansi’s Spider Units and OR14s were a formidable force - their increased legs meant they had improved flexibility and speed. Spider Units in particular were rapidly adopted by other God Programs in different regions of the world. The West African Coalition struggled against them, until Adawe and Overwatch helped coordinate an attack on Ibadan. Anansi was captured and put in waking isolation for many years. He was released as part of the Numbani negotiations, and oversees the city. He would do anything to prevent going back in isolation again. God Ability: Web-connectivity. Unique Omnic Forces: Spider Units and OR14s.

7. Rainbow Serpent: the Omnic God Program from the Gibson Desert, Australia. The flat, open terrain of the Gibson Desert proved to be a massive tactical disadvantage to the Southeast Asian-Australian-Zealand forces, as the Rainbow Serpent was able to simply put stationary Bastions in sentry mode and gun down anything that came remotely close. It maintained these massive battlefronts due to its ability to move between Central Cores. The Rainbow Serpent maintained control over much of Western Australia until close to the end of the Crisis, when it humanity began to send all remaining forces to fight it. After Mokosh “disappeared” the Rainbow Serpent panicked and surrendered. It was eventually given a huge swath of land in Australia by the government as a sort of “peace treaty,” but the residents of Junkertown attacked and destroyed it. It is believed to be dead, but Mako swears that in certain lighting, Jamison’s skin looks a little...off. That’s probably just the radiation, though. God Ability: “Well-jumping”

8. Basket Ogress: the fledgling Omnic God Program from Seattle, Washington. “Younger” than the other God Programs, Basket Ogress was just beginning to flex her powers when Overwatch struck. One of the first God Programs captured by Overwatch, not much is known about her. Gabriel estimated her “emotional intelligence and sentience maturity levels” to be on par with a child’s. Gabriel waited until her consciousness was “asleep” and then destroyed her isolation container, an action that his entire team agreed with. When asked why he would “destroy such a valuable AI asset,” he responded with “it’s fucking inhumane, cruel, and abusive to leave a child locked up for the rest of their lives, especially when you only see her as ‘an asset.’” Upon hearing the news, the other God Programs disagreed over the Overwatch Commander’s actions - some understood why he did it, others refused to tolerate such a crime. God Ability: not yet developed.

9. The Athena “AI”: almost nothing is known about her in the United Nations database. The report filed by Jack Morrison states that “the enhanced gorilla scientist, Winston Winston developed this artificial intelligence in the Lunar Horizon Colony. She is his intellectual property and with his permission will be deployed as an AI for the organizational structure of Overwatch.” Many within the United Nations protested Athena’s incorporation into Overwatch’s servers due to “her obvious God Program name.” When “nothing terrible happened,” ambassadors eventually settled down and “forgot” about her. All that is known is that Athena is “extremely loyal” to Winston and refuses to work or “exist” separately from him. She assisted his work at Lucheng for a brief period of time. She has a strangely personal and strong relationship with Shimada Genji. God Ability: ???

10. Snowball “AI”: [ERROR: no information found]
Deadlock Gang: a massive drug and arms-trafficking gang that effectively ruled the American Southwest in the wake of the Crisis and La Medianoche. They had their main hide-out in the canyons west of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Breaking up their network and putting down their empire was a massive undertaking by Transitional Overwatch, with a “final showdown” that went very awry when a young shooter with a “deadeye aim” and a fusion revolver critically injured eight of Gabriel’s agents during a bitter push. He was finally stopped when he was physically tackled, but his plan worked - many members of Deadlock’s “leadership” escaped arrest. The main leader of Deadlock, Terry Hernandez, was put in prison. “No one knows” what happened to the “six-gun shooter.” Recently, Deadlock has started to return to power - without Overwatch or Blackwatch to put a stop to them, they are slowly and steadily reclaiming their territory across the Southwest, reaching as far west as Los Angeles and as far north as Grand Mesa. It is unknown what is “fueling” their growth.

Los Muertos: an anti-corporation and pro-anarchy gang that sprang up out of disillusioned rurales fighters in Dorado when they felt that the newly restored Federal Government was not running the country well. Early Los Muertos members believed that President Portero was demanding far too much out of the physical Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant system, and also far too much out of the workers there with little compensation. They are currently vehemently opposed to the partially-state-run LumériCo and the “new fusion power grid” that is proposed to go online by the end of 2076. In an effort to begin escalating their protests, they started engaging in the newly reemerged drug and arms-trafficking Deadlock network, and started “recruiting” more members. The second generation leadership is far more ruthless and ambitious than the first generation members. Many citizens of Dorado no longer support their efforts or consider them threats to the city. They have a tenuous relationship with “Sombra.”

LumériCo: A semi-state-run corporation focusing on developing fusion-based technologies, mainly for energy, but there are a number of suspicious activities that seem to be occurring, based on internal email correspondences. It is unknown where the designs for their fusion cores came from, or how they were developed. Portero claims he has “hired the best physicists in the world to produce them.” Winston is suspicious of such a claim because he was never offered a job.

United European Defensive Front: the European Union’s solution to the Omnic Crisis was to join its various nations’ forces together into a single cohesive unit. Even after the end of the Omnic Crisis, the Front was kept together in case of disasters. The most well-known and infamous program adopted from the German National Forces was the Crusader Supersoldier Program. Reinhardt Wilhelm is the only currently living member of the program.

U.S. Supersoldier Enhancement Program: This “secret” program was run jointly by the CIA and USSOCOM in an effort to stay on par with the Russian and Chinese supersoldier programs. 150 of the best soldiers or cadets from the ages of 18-25 were recruited to join the program. They were given injections of both natural and artificial hormones, proteins, “bio-recyclable” carbohydrates, and endorphins, among other things. Studies from the program show that the candidates developed improved glial cells, more efficient muscular tissue, and denser cortical bone. The non-decaying proteins and carbohydrates are reutilized by the body during times of high stress, providing an extra boost of energy under duress. Participants were made to engage in “simulations” for the first half of the program; after the Omnic Crisis began, participants were directly deployed to the field. Participants were ranked based on unknown criteria - the top ten participants at any given time were given special privileges and benefits, but also more responsibilities. Participants were called “Candidate: [number]” in the simulation facility and “Soldier: [number]” in field duties. When the Crisis broke out, the program was moved to the Bakersfield front to help fight in the war. At the front, the soldiers were made to test experimental weaponry that was too dangerous for a normal human to handle. Upon being recruited by the supra-national task force Overwatch, Reyes and Morrison seized the property rights to the Heavy Pulse Rifle and the plasma-powered modified
shotguns. In 2076, it was believed that all the SEP participants are dead or “decommissioned” - however, a vigilante with superhuman abilities and reflexives has recently appeared, single-handedly defeating Helix Security forces in old Watchpoints across the United States.

Everybody else is made up. Don’t get too attached to any of the OCs, kids - that includes the God Programs. You’ve been warned.

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The Potential Questions, Character Profiles, and the Timeline for “And Overwatch For All” have been moved to a separate page, just for them. You can find them [Here].

Chapter End Notes

SORRY YALL. Hopefully this gives you some indication of the scope of this fic. It's big. I wasn't lying or exaggerating the size of it.
Back In Black

Chapter Summary

A meeting between two ghosts occurs in the dead of night.

Ever so slowly, things begin to move.

Chapter Notes

Song is "Back in Black" - AC/DC (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjJe1rBdm9U)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back in black
I hit the sack
I've been too long I'm glad to be back
Yes, I'm let loose
From the noose
That's kept me hanging about
I've been looking at the sky
'Cause it's gettin' me high
Forget the hearse 'cause I never die
I got nine lives
Cat's eyes
Abusin' every one of them and running wild

'Cause I'm back
Yes, I'm back
Well, I'm back
Yes, I'm back
Well, I'm back, back
Well, I'm back in black
Yes, I'm back in black

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Segador: Arachnophobia

Monday, June 29, 2076: 04:32 a.m. - Outside Istanbul, Turkey
When they meet again, it’s in the ostentatious office of some dude’s fucking McMansion outside of Istanbul.

Reaper’s got one of his shotguns pressed to the guy’s forehead. The man is trembling and shaking and stammering out long-winded, rambling sentences about how he’ll pay any sum of money, he’s got loads of it, anything, whatever Reaper wants. Behind his mask, Reaper just rolls his eyes and heaves an exhausted sigh.

Despite everything that’s happened, Reaper hasn’t quite lost his covert ops skills. He knew all about the guy, had tracked down his dirty laundry and everything. The man was some rich ass CEO of some bullshit company or another, but he had his hands dipped in a bunch of cookie jars, many of them illegal - stuff like mobs, casinos, prostitution trafficking, the works. Man was a fucking douchebag through and through.

But the part that Reaper was really interested in were his “philanthropic contributions.”

Oh, sure, that’s what they were headed under, but Reaper knew better. Lots of “stated funds” going to charities or “good organizations” like Reaper’s old friend the U.N., but the vast majority of that money ended up directly in hands of committee members and not in the actual organization’s budgets.

And the man had dropped boatloads of money into Overwatch before things had gone to shit. Although conveniently, those funds had started to run dry right when things were going to shit.

Now, he didn’t believe in fate worth a damn, but Reaper also wasn’t a big believer in coincidences. It was just an easy way of handwaving away connections between larger forces you can’t yet perceive.

And Reaper was fucking out for those larger forces.

So here he is, one Repent shotgun cocked to the man’s head (who by the way, is pissing himself, which causes Reaper to wrinkle his nose in disgust, his scars twitching), about to whip out a badass line about how “he doesn’t want money - he wants blood” when a fucking BULLET cracks through the office window and whizzes by his hood.

“HOLY FUCK,” he yelps, his instincts forcing him to drop to his knee and duck out of the line of sight of the window. The man is whimpering and weeping and huddling around himself as ANOTHER FUCKING BULLET WHIZZES BY JESUS CHRIST.

“Holy shit, tío,” Reaper growls as he yanks the man down to the floor (old instincts die hard and, really, Reaper has wanted this kill for awhile so he’s not letting some fucking lowlife assassin take that from him), “You gotta get your shit together.”

“Please, please just take my money, I’ll give you everything, just spare me, please God.”

“Look, man, I might be godly, but I really need you to shut the fuck up because I don’t got that all-seeing shit going on,” Reaper hisses as another bullet clips the window frame just above his head. “And your whiny ass is making it really hard to concentrate.”

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god, please, just spare me, holy fucking shit - ”

Reaper presses a knuckle to his mask’s forehead (as if that would somehow actually ease the growing pain in his real forehead). Dios dame paciencia, Dios dame paciencia.
The sniper fire stops and he hears some sort of shouting. The fuzzing in his head only seems to grow more obnoxious as he strains his ears to hear what they’re saying. A group of them, for starters, at least one sniper, maybe more, but on-the-ground units? He’s not entirely sure why whoever they are rolled a whole fucking squad out for one jerkwad of a CEO...unless they brought out the welcoming party for him?

Fucking assholes. Couldn’t he just have a quiet night of reaping in peace?

“COME OUT,” one of the ground units yells, “AND KEEP YOUR HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM.” He can hear a subset of them moving on the gravel walkway outside, popping up from the garden bushes and surrounding the window. Reaper thinks he could probably take them all on and be on his douchebag way in like...two minutes. Four minutes tops.

But there is still the sniper to think about. He’s still not entirely certain if a well-placed shot could kill him for good. And even if it can’t kill him, it’ll still hurt like all hell and probably put him in smoke mode for a day or two. He really doesn’t care for the sound of that.

The man next to him is still trembling and still smells like piss.

His headache is growing worse.

“You know,” he finally says, really to air and not to the man next to him, “I’m not hungry anymore.”

Reaper grabs the man by the back of his neck and practically throws him back onto his feet. The man is screaming and yells and his arms are pinwheeling when whoever the fuck is out there absolutely riddles him with bullets. Just fucking Swiss cheeses him. His body is held upright by the momentum of Reaper’s push for about thirty seconds until the force of like 50 rounds of rifle fire pushes him back down.

Well holy fuck indeed.

There’s a long moment of uncomfortable stillness as everyone holds their breath. The smoke of the rifles dissipates through the air and Reaper weighs his options. He was kind of hoping they’d just fucking LEAVE if they got the damn asshole. He hadn’t thought about what he’d do if they stuffed him with death pellets.

I’m losing my touch, he thinks sourly. Reyes would have never put himself in this -

Fuck Reyes. He pushes the thought away from his throbbing head and stuffs it back down in his mental garbage chute where it belongs.

“Are you gonna come out or do we have to do that to you too?” the voice calls out, and Reaper sighs for what is probably the thousandth time that night. Fuck him, fuck his life.

“Bueno, what the fuck do you assholes want?” Reaper grumbles back, loud enough that he startles the gunmen surrounding him - he can hear them jump slightly on the gravel outside. The noise sounded like daggers to his head and he just wants to get this shit over with.

He was never a people-person back when he was...that asshole, and the feeling had only gotten worse since the explosion and subsequent fuckery 5 years ago. It’s been ages since he’s really attempted to interact with people who weren’t his targets and eventual victims. He’s not entirely sure how to act or what to do.

Just fucking shoot them, a voice inside him growls, anxious to get the fuck outta there. He’s half-tempted to ghost outside and light them up like a Christmas tree of death, but the pain and lack of
“food” is starting to really seep into him, spreading from his head down his neck.

“Just...show yourself with your hands up,” the guy says, attempting to sound authoritative and failing.

Reaper snorts. “Fuck you, kid. Send in your CO, and then we’ll talk.” ABOUT WHAT, the voice inside him yells, THERE’S NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS.

“I am ‘ere.”

The voice that calls back is cool, oozing a French femme fatale vibe like something out of an old Hollywood noir film. Reaper feels a strange chill crawl up his back, like an insect stuck under his shirt, wriggling around on his cold skin. He hears steady, even steps on the gravel until the footsteps stop on just the other side of the wall.

He’ll deny until the day something actually manages to kill him that he was scared in this moment. ...But he was a little unnerved.

She sounds…

Gritting his teeth, he rises in what he hopes is an intimidating manner, smoke swirling out from under his jacket and hood. He already knows he’s large and terrifying - everyone and their grandmothers could see what the Enhancement Program had done to him in life - but he wonders if the smoke is a touch too dramatic. All well.

The ground units flinch back, and while he can’t see their expressions behind those ugly ass visors, he knows he’s sparked something in them. Good. Let the fuckers know who was in charge here. He scans them - there’s six of the ground units, each one in armor chestplates and holding mass-produced rifles and dressed in all grey.

Could they look any more generically evil, Reaper - the man dressed in a fucking shredded black trench jacket and skull mask - wonders, without a trace of irony.

He snaps his gaze to the seventh member directly in front of him. She’s tall, long and lean and has more curves than Lombard Street, dressed in what is literally a fucking skintight leotard with the deepest v-neck he’s ever seen and slick leggings. She has a FUCKING MASSIVE SNIPER RIFLE HOLY SHIT resting with practiced ease on one shoulder. When he pulls his eyes away from the gun, he finally notices the massive, eight-camera headpiece on her forehead, and that crawl drags up his spine again. He’s never been a big fan of biotech, and that thing looks deadly without even needing a gun.

Finally he sets his eyes square on hers and nearly turns into smoke out of shock.

There’s something unnatural about her eyes - they glitter despite the darkness of the night and he feels like he’s an animal that’s been trapped, cornered. Her golden gaze pins him down like a nail before a hammer. He is never entirely certain about his senses anymore, but he could swear her skin is...a weird blueish tint.

Despite that, there’s also something uncanny about her, something itching at the back of his head like a spider bite…

She takes a deep, calm breath, looking completely unfazed by his appearance. “Reaper,” she says, in that icy voice.

He grimaces a little. So maybe he’s acquired something of a reputation.
“...Talon,” he responds, just as coldly.

“We were surprised to see you ‘ere,” she continues, shifting her stance a little to ease her rifle around. “We ‘ad ‘eard rumors that our target was being stalked by others. I am pleased they turned out to be true.”

“What does it matter as long as he dies,” Reaper growls out, both a question and a statement. For a moment, the sniper glares at him, her eyes just as sharp as her voice, and Reaper again feels that strange twinge -

“Talon likes to ‘andle its own affairs. We do not like knowing that others got to our kill first.” She flips her long ponytail with a haughty flick of her head. Reaper is growing more unsettled by the second and he cannot fucking figure out WHY -

“Well, your henchman here got him. So let’s just all walk back to our separate dugouts and call it a win for Talon, ¿no?” he asks, wanting to leave as quickly as possible. The pain from his head and neck is spreading, and he can feel a new sense of pain flaring up from his lower back and holy fuck he needs to reap something fast -

“My superior will want to speak with you,” she murmurs, her cold face seemingly unreadable. Why is this bothering him so much?

“What the fuck for? He’s dead, with Talon bullets in him. Mission fucking accomplished.” He cannot shake the feeling that something is really fucking off. “Why the fuck did you need seven people to do this?”

“Oh, we only needed one person for ‘im,” she says, with a light gesture to the body on the floor behind him. A frozen, cruel smile flashes on her face and her eyes light up with a surreal viciousness as she sneers, “The others were for you.”

*Mierda.*

In the past, he would’ve jumped to the side while spraying the air with shotgun shells, taking cover and trusting his supersoldier instincts to get him to a more tactical position. But he’s not a supersoldier anymore.

He’s not sure he’s even human anymore.

Reaper fucking *dissolves* into the air and he hears the Talon lackeys shriek. His smoke lunges at one of them, wrapping around him as the man screams and screams behind his visor. There is the cracking of rifle fire in the air, and the monster in him is pleased to see that the bullets have simply passed through his smoke and into his victim, is thrilled to see the life drain from the man’s eyes into his waiting claws. The smoke engulfs the orb of life that appears before him and *draws in*, reaping the essence of life into its ghostly form.

The whole thing passes in only a fraction of a second, and then he’s onto the next one.

The Talon squad is tumbling into disarray, bullets flying everywhere, hitting each other, the house, the bushes, the gravel - everything except Reaper. He’s snatching soul after soul, devouring and eating and *reveling* in the sheer joy of being without pain, without form, without physical, burning existence dragging him down to earth. There’s a great and terrible laughter that echoes through the garden and it takes him a full second to realize that it is his own voice, still cruelly unfamiliar and broken-sounding even though he’s been like this for years now.

He feels great.
Feels like air.
Feels like freedom.

So why does something still hurt so fucking bad?

He doesn’t know the answer - he hasn’t known for nearly six or seven years now, maybe longer. He’s not really sure when this pain began. He doesn’t care. He tells himself he doesn’t care. Death becomes him and he becomes Death and why does everything still hurt he doesn’t care, he fucking refuses to care.

The color blue rises in his heart and he consumes that too, like another soul essence.

It doesn’t make anything better, but he feels a little fuller.

His senses have sharpened with the hearty meal, and with a swirling flourish, he returns to his human form, whipping his arms around and around until he has them pointed up to the balcony on the second floor. He comes to a stop, grinding his feet in the gravel, his instincts knowing the situation faster than his thoughts, shotguns aimed at the lean, shadowy figure of the sniper on the second floor.

*How the fuck did she get up there?*

“My, that was impressive,” she chuckles, again in that cold, inhuman voice, “I did not fully believe all the stories but it seems they are true.”

“...So it seems,” Reaper snarls, shotguns still raised. He’s not really sure if he could hit her from here, but it might be worth a shot. The pain has receded with the gift of life surging through him, but that wiggling, creeping feeling returns and he scowls, struggling to understand why -

There is a rustling in the bushes and grass behind him.

Mother. Fucker.

“Well done, Widowmaker,” a tough masculine voice says somewhere behind him. The mask and hood makes it impossible to see, but his quinessence-heightened senses have made his hearing keener. There’s...four...six...ten...maybe twelve of them. Even with his meal, he’s not sure he could take them all on at once. Even Death Blossom would not be enough.

“Now, now, sir, let’s put those guns down. Widowmaker was just doing what was asked of her,” the man says again. Slowly, Reaper lowers one arm and shifts his stance, until he’s pointing the other shotgun directly at the Talon agent speaking behind him.

There’s a tense silence, until he finally lowers both arms. But he knows they are all aware of the threat.

“What the fuck do you want?” he hisses, glancing towards the agent and then back to the sniper. Widowmaker? Something about her unsettles him way more than being surrounded -

“We just want to talk to you, sir. Approach you with an...offer.”

Reaper sneers beneath the mask. “I will *not* work under Talon.”

“Oh no, we are aware of your...peculiarities,” the agent says, a little more cautiously. “We’ve heard the stories of your...abilities and were interested in seeing how you feel about a...partnership.”

Reaper glances towards him, then back towards Widowmaker. His thoughts are unraveling,
struggling to jam puzzle pieces together. Why the *fuck* won’t his thoughts settle down -

“I’m not interested in any sort of deal - ” his words and thoughts die in his throat.

Widowmaker has shifted slightly in the moonlight and, *fuck*, he’s not really sure *why* - maybe it’s his stronger senses post-meal, or maybe he’s just so fucking keyed up from the events of the night - but something *finally fucking clicks* and it’s like he can see it as clear as day.

**Amélie.**

The name rushes through him like fire consuming dry tinder and he feels something inside him explode with energy. Now that he’s seen it, he doesn’t know how he’s missed it - the tall figure, as graceful and powerful as a ballerina, her long hair pulled back tight, pale skin and dark sneers. But there’s something missing from her - some characteristic that he’s not really entirely sure what it is. He stares at her with a loss for words, his thoughts shoving each other to get to the forefront of his mind.

*How in the fucking FUCK I thought she was dead we all thought she was dead I fucking TOLD JACK to do a rescue mission but no he thought it was TOO FUCKING DANGEROUS WHAT THE FUCKING HELL IS SHE DOING HERE didn’t Talon fucking kidnap her why is she working with them*

He attempts to steer his thoughts back on some sort of course, but it’s like the world has fucking shifted beneath him and he can’t get his footing back. A god damn mental paradigm shift had broken into his thoughts and scrambled them like eggs on hot pavement, and he is left reeling until a thought stampedes its way to his brain.

**Brainwashing.**

The voice is cool and distant and calculating and he’s not entirely sure whose voice or thought it is, but it makes sense. The voice flickers thoughts and images at him - getting reports of Talon activities in Blackwatch, hearing Gerard explain that people were disappearing the world over, reading of the rumors in distant villages and backwoods towns about cult-like activities, listening absently to Jesse talk about raids on smaller Overwatch bases, weapons vanishing out of Blackwatch safehouses, people he didn’t really trust but couldn’t ignore murmuring to him that the Strike-Commander was *terrified* of him, of him -

Reaper steels his mind against the last few memories, and hones in on the brainwashing.

It wasn’t...impossible. God knows that history had proven it to be startlingly *easy* time and again - even Blackwatch had looked at the known theories and practices and concluded that it could be done. But it had been a line Reyes had never wanted to cross. Murders, assassinations, destabilization, ending regimes, even manipulating informants - he could stomach those for the goal of peace. But outright torture to recraft a person, repurpose them for God fucking knows what?

Makes him feel fucking sick.

He hasn’t eaten real food in years but he feels like throwing up.

Widowmaker’s - Amélie’s - eyes narrow as if sensing his mental struggles and he forces himself to maintain his tall, arrogant posture. *Don’t let them see weakness*, the voice whispers again, this time feeling strangely worried, *Just listen. Just watch.*

The Talon agent is waiting for his response, his face unreadable behind that damn contemptible visor. Reaper slowly draws in breath, exhales it back out. In and out. In and out.
One...two...three...four...five…

At the end of the fifth breath, he finally mutters with the exhale, “This ‘partnership’...what’s it involve?”

He can practically feel the smug glee radiate off the asshole of an agent and the man starts his little spiel.

“I’m glad you asked, sir -” (oh my fucking god, did he actually say that). “See, some of the brighter minds at Talon (Reaper snorts in disbelief) have noticed you in the last year or so, seem to realize you’re picking off ex-Overwatch agents and supporters (Reaper wonders if he’s been that fucking transparent). Talon’s got a similar cause, sir - we hate the damn fools, and we want to remove every trace of it from the world. As you’re no doubt aware, there are still people who seem to think that Overwatch can still be an active force in the world, if they just get the right support, you know what I mean -” (oh my god, end this), “- and Talon is committed to stopping that and we - ”

“Holy fuck, Cato, I got it, you want to fight Carthage. How old are you, pendejo?”

The agent stops, small yammering noise coming from his mask, until he finally squeaks out, “I’m thirty-six.”

Jesse’s age.

“That was one of the worst fucking business proposals I’ve ever heard. Go sign up for a community college, enroll in a speech course, learn how to fucking talk to strangers, ace the damn class and come back to me. Or get the fucking lead out and get to the goddamn point.”

There’s a fucking chortle of laughter from the second story, and Reaper snaps his eyes back up to Widowmaker, who is ATTEMPTING TO HIDE HER SMILE BEHIND A DEMURE HAND HOLY FUCK.

For a half a second, Reaper thinks he sees her again.

Sees Amélie.

Despite her blue (?) skin and weird sniper headgear and the seriously thin spandex she’s wearing, he can see traces of her with his increased vision - the soft crinkle around her nose, the way her lips quirk up just past her hand, the small gleam in her eyes.

For a half a second, the pain feels completely gone.

Quick as a flash, the fraction of Amélie is gone, replaced by another cold, daunting smirk and lifeless, shining eyes.

He’s not really sure if he actually saw her, or if his ever-loosening grip on reality was still slipping.

Focus, asshole, Reaper breathes, pulling himself back. Focus.

The man behind him is stammering something about money and payment and mercenaries, and Reaper finds himself impatient. He doesn’t give a fuck about Talon or its missions, he’s not terribly interested in money. He reaps because he has to, because he’s fucking stuck like this goddamn Lovecraftian horror being, and he just prefers if his prey comes from the assholes who fucking wronged him.

But holy fuck, if Amélie’s mere presence doesn’t make him feel fucking vindicated.
Suck it, Jack Morrison, pinche pendejo. I was fucking right.

Reaper will take feeling like a smug bastard over killing scumbag CEOs any god damn day.

“Done,” he hisses, grinning wildly, and he hears the agent choke out, “I - What?”

“It’s done. I’m not gonna be a Talon agent, but I’ll fucking join you.” Reaper never takes his eyes off Widowmaker, who is still giving him that icicle of a smirk. He’s not talking to the agent - he’s talking to her, and she knows it. With movements like a gymnast, she vaults off the balcony and lands gracefully before him, rising again with lithe, catlike movements. He watches her like a hawk as she saunters up to him, hoisting Gerard’s rifle onto her shoulder again.

“Bienvenue, Reaper,” she smiles, dead and cold and distant.

They have met again, but Reaper realizes he’s never really met her before.

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Back in the back
Of a Cadillac
Number one with a bullet, I'm a power pack
Yes, I'm in a bang
With a gang
They've got to catch me if they want me to hang
'Cause I'm back on the track
And I'm beatin' the flack
Nobody's gonna get me on another rap
So look at me now
I'm just makin' my play
Don't try to push your luck, just get out of my way

'Cause I'm back
Yes, I'm back
Well, I'm back
Yes, I'm back
Well, I'm back, back
Well, I'm back in black
Yes, I'm back in black

Chapter End Notes

Reaper has no idea what he's doing lol
Lawful Evil

Chapter Summary

Reaper joins Talon and discovers that Talon is...very different from what he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Segador: It’s always sunny in Talon**

For what feels like the f**kteenth-millionth time, he fidgets uncomfortably in his seat.

In all fairness, Reaper hasn’t been on a ship in... guess the last time was heading to the Swiss Base, he thinks dryly, shifting a little again, Didn’t really need to get on a ship after that. Across from him in the parallel seats, several Talon agents look at anything but him. Clearly, they’re also uncomfortable.

Good. Let the f**kers feel a little fear.

Not that Reaper was one to talk. Beneath the mask, his eyes glance nervously at the walls and the awkwardly warm bodies around him. The noise of the engines is just a little bit too loud, and he finds the weird droning sets him on edge. Everything feels close, too close, pressing in on him and trapping him and collapsing around -

“Are we there yet?” he asks, but with his broken voice it sounds like Cthulhu speaking to a human mindslave through the cracks of time. At least it sounds intimidating and not whiny, you asshole.

To his right, Widowmaker snorts derisively, “We ‘ave been in the air for five minutes.” She’s sitting stiffly upright but somehow manages to also look curled around her sniper rifle, which she...seems to cradle? He tilts his head at her in confusion and annoyance, muttering, “I’m sorry I’m not a fucking human stopwatch like you.”

“Merde, ‘ave some patience. It’s only a thirty minute flight,” she sniffs, as if he’s somehow supposed to have been impressed by that. He rolls his eyes, trying his hardest to fight off the feeling of closing walls and rattling seats and the sinking pit where his stomach is supposed to be -

“I just think we could make this baby move a little faster,” he mutters, mainly to himself, fighting off the edge that’s making his teeth ache. He shuts his eyes briefly, but that only makes the sensation of everything collapsing around him worse -

“And risk getting shot down over the Mediterranean? Please. Stop being ridiculous.” But she pauses thoughtfully, and then, with a side glance, flashes that icy grin at him with a quirk of her mouth, “Although I suppose you would be the only one to survive something like that, wouldn’t you?”

Reaper again looks in her direction, attempting to discern if that was a simple “dur hur, you can’t die” joke or something...more astute. The jittering of the ship is making his head spin a little and he desperately wishes he could turn into smoke and just fly on his own, but his smoke form gets a
little...troublesome when he sustains it too long and he loses himself -

*Focus, asshole,* the voice snarls at him, and he grips at the edge of his seat with what he assumes is white-knuckled intensity, but his blood moves differently than it used to, so maybe it’s not white-knuckled -

Something soft and very slightly warm brushes against his right arm and he jerks a little at the suddenness of it.

The light in the ship is a weird dimmish red from the emergency paneling, so it’s hard to make out the expression on Widowmaker’s face. She’s looking almost bored, twiddling with the sniper rifle in her right hand, but her left has positioned itself unnervingly close to Reaper’s hand on the bench seating. He stares at her long and solidly, curious if it was just a weird accident, when her hawkish gaze flicks towards him - so suddenly and so fast that he wonders if it was just a weird shift of the reddish glow - and then away again.

Reaper feels something entirely separate from his anxiety drop into his intestines.

It was similar to the feeling he had in the garden when her laughter had gone from cold to warm and back to cold.

A shiver works its way back up to his spine and he wonders if he’s fucking in over his head -

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He’s pretty sure he’s clawed up his section of the seating by the time they touch down.

It had been a fucking fast ride, but holy shit, every second had felt like nails on a chalkboard, like he was constantly swallowing down screams and horrific sinking feelings. He had spent most of the ride convinced the walls were going to swallow him whole and engulf him in a blast of heat and wailing fire -

“Reaper,” a calm, yet hard-edged voice called to him, “A pleasure to finally meet at last.”

It takes him an embarrassingly long second to realize the cargo bay is open and some jackass in a slightly more formal grey uniform is standing there. The harsh sunlight hits Reaper like a blinding sneeze and he twists away reflexively, his eyes stinging over the sudden brightness. All around him, the Talon agents are standing and stretching and stepping off the ship.

He gropes blindly for the lock on his seatbelt and fumbles with it, his claws catching at all the wrong spots. Finally, when he manages to stop making a huge fucking tool out of himself, he unbuckles the belt and rises slowly, his legs feeling numb and useless.

*I should just shadowstep,* he thinks as his eyes adjust and he turns towards the individual waiting for him. *But that would probably just impress these dickwads more.*

He notices, a second too late, that Widowmaker has disappeared with the rest of the slow-moving Talon agents. As the feeling of being useful returns to his legs, he squares up with the other person. They stare each other down for a sullen moment when Reaper decides he *really does not fucking like being on this ship the walls are narrowing and crumbling and the floor will open up and swallow him* -

“Do we have to shake like this is some sort of goddamn interview, or are you gonna introduce yourself?” he snarls. The person - he’s not entirely sure if they’re a man or a woman, but Reaper kinda figures he should be the last person to judge at this point, what with how he looks - appears
briefly surprised by his language, their slick features moving backwards like the recoil of a shotgun. But they recover quickly, an easy smile flitting onto their face.

“Out here, you may call me Gerente. I am the manager of this base of operations,” they say with cheesy customer service pleasantness, “All...business matters run through me, including your payments, any technical matters, and any supply issues you may encounter.”

Reaper scowls a little, the Spanish easy in his mind. Gerente. Manager. So a codename.

“So you ain’t the big bad around here,” he growls, both a question and an observation. Gerente chuckles slightly, but Reaper feels uneasy at the sound.

“No, sir, I’m afraid that if you’re looking for a director to discuss terms with, you will have to wait.” Gerente steps to the side and gestures down the ramp, and after a beat where he once again questions the sanity of what he’s doing, Reaper heads down it.

Despite their smaller stature, Gerente is able to keep up with Reaper as they both step into the brighter sunlight. Reaper flinches a little at the sharpness, but he’s relieved to be off the damn ship and into a -

The airfield looks duly ordinary, with the exception of Talon agents moving about between ships and running errands. The sky above them is clear and fairly blue considering how early into the morning it is, but Reaper supposes that’s just summer in southern Europe. He’s mildly surprised to see how close some of the dry hills are around them, and he vaguely wonders if the base is set into a range.

Would make sense, provide some coverage, even if they are operating a fucking airport out of here. He quickly scans around, noting the size ranges of the different ships. A hub of some sort. Maybe a drop-off point between Northern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East. It wouldn’t surprise him - several of the Watchpoints had been set up with similar concepts in mind.

Gerente steps off and begins a startlingly fast stride towards the low buildings several hundred meters away, and Reaper finds himself rushing a little to catch up to them.

“Talon operates under basic clandestine cellular structures,” Gerente explains as they move, their tone conversational even though there’s noises and wind whipping about them, “No one here has direct contact to any of the major heads of the organization - ”

“Including you?” Reaper asks, rather surprised by the disconnect. The clandestine cell structure he had been well aware of after…

After…

Behind the mask, he shuts his eyes, feeling his headache grow worse, even on stable ground.

He doesn’t want to think about the last year of Overwatch.

“I have only distant communications with them - on very rare occasions, one of them may stop by our base to check in before they return to their usual...interests,” Gerente says pleasantly, as if they were chatting about old college buddies and extended family members. The manager of the base hums jovially, “Otherwise, I receive messages and mission assignments, and send back reports on the operations of the base, as well as manage the transferring of squads, mercenaries, supplies, and funding.”

“So you’re logistics and HR rolled into one?” Reaper asks, and Gerente sends him that odd smile again, replying, “I am whatever the organization needs me to be.”
Reaper wonders if no one in Talon knows how to be happy.

...*Would make sense*, he thinks dryly, again. Reaper watches as a group of Talon agents move towards the ship behind them, shouting over the droning hum of the engine, “I’m surprised the organization would take on mercenaries - Talon does not seem to lack for...willing bodies.”

At least -

Not as he remembers it.

*Rogue elements infiltrating his organization, wearing black and grey and red, his skull-and-knife logo on their shoulders, “escorting” him down hallways until -*

*Focus*, the voice hisses in his head, as Reaper forces himself to zone back in on Gerente’s dry chuckle that sounds like uncomfortable cotton in Reaper’s ears.

Reaper fights the urge to tell them not to be a creepy motherfucker.

“Talon is always interested in the best and brightest, and there is no end to the...backers of the organization, shall we say?” Gerente says with mild humor and creepiness, before they flash an eerily knowing smirk at him, saying tauntingly, “And *you* have been on something of a...*priority* list, hmm? Is that a good way to put it?”

...*Oh.*

That’s a **bad** sign.

“What,” Reaper states aridly, feeling the heat of the tarmac and the simmer of confusion rise together in his chest, but Gerente just laughs that awkward, unnerving laugh, saying, “Your reputation far precedes you, *señor segador de almas*. Talon has been interested in acquiring your skills and services for many years now.”

...*Right.*

His...**reputation**.

“Yeah, well,” Reaper mutters as they give a wide berth to another ship, “I was never interested in being *acquired*."

*And yet here you are*, that needling voice whispers in his head, *Walking right into their claws.*

*Talons*, Reaper corrects himself with deadpan sarcasm, *They have talons.*

Somehow, he doesn’t find the humor in his own stupid joke.

“Do not worry, my friend,” Gerente says in the least reassuring HR tone Reaper has ever heard from anyone, “We pay well - far better than most on the black market, yes?”

“Cool beans, bro,” Reaper states with the least enthusiastic tone either of them has ever heard, but then the mercenary forces himself to grit out more conversationally, “For someone grinding through middle management, you know an awful lot about how this corporation of evil functions.”

“It is my job to introduce newcomers to the organization. At the bare minimum, you should have answers necessary to facilitate your membership,” Gerente continues, tilting their head a little, and Reaper gets the gist immediately.
Curiosity killed the cat, Reaper reads between the lines. Don’t ask too many questions, you won’t get too many answers, and the answers you will get will be so hypothetical you’ll make Schrodinger’s cat both dead and not dead. ...Wait, did I just describe myself?

...That’s not how Schrodinger’s cat works, the voice inside him chides, It’s about quantum positionality and -

“Rest assured,” Gerente continues as they finally enter the shade of the buildings’ overhangs, “You shall be paid in genuine credits to an account of your choosing. Talon has many mercenaries working under it, and does not mind paying for your...services.”

“Oh uh…” Reaper thinks he feels a shiver of unease slide down the hairs of his neck, “So I give that information to you.”

“Estás correcto, mi amigo, this will all be done electronically, should you require anonymity,” Gerente explains, as a pair of metal doors slide open before them and they step inside.

Reaper frowns again. Inside is just as bright as the outside, which is like...not what he had imagined an evil terror organization to be like. Immediately, though, he’s sensing odd details that stand out.

Bright lights, temperature-controlled filtered air, electronic comms panels on every other door, lots of windows, nothing dingy or dirty or broken. A highly functional, well-funded terror organization.

Gerente pauses by one of the comms panels, and gestures, “I assume you know how to use one of these.”

“Of course,” Reaper states gruffly. He’s bluffing, but a comms device is a comms device.

“You can reach me through any panel in any of the buildings. How quickly I’ll respond is a different matter, but I’ll get to you at some point,” Gerente smiles.

A 2.5 star out of 5 quality reassurance. That’s what makes the Talon Difference™, Reaper scoffs to himself, but Gerente is already on the move. They’re tapping something on their personal datapad, and Reaper again finds himself rushing to keep up as they move up the hallway.

“So...these mercenaries… Is the sniper one of them?” he asks, in a manner he hopes is suave and not a deadass giveaway. Gerente raises an eyebrow in his direction, but answers anyways, “Widowmaker? No, Widowmaker is a Talon operative and one of the best at that.”

“Oh, uh, is that so?” Way to be a smooth operator there, asshole.

“I am surprised you did not know that. After all, Widowmaker is the one who took down Overwatch’s Ana Amari upon her debut - ”

Reaper’s legs suddenly stop being useful again and he nearly trips over himself at the words, both his feet and his mind grinding to a sudden screech.

“WHAT?”

Gerente pauses with him and turns back towards him, frowning for the first time in the exchange. “Indeed, Widowmaker proved herself by killing Gérard Lacroix of Overwatch fame, but she truly cemented herself to be an invaluable asset in the field when she sniped down Amari.”

Reaper’s jaw does not seem to work properly, as it also hangs about uselessly beneath his mask. His mind begins moving before his feet do -
“- alright? ¿Estás bien, señor Reaper? Are you alright?”

“YEAH, YEAH, HOLY SHIT, YEAH, I’M OKAY. BIEN, BIEN, ALL THAT SHIT,” Reaper stammers out when his ears finally process the questions Gerente is asking through them. Gerente hasn’t stopped frowning, although Reaper thinks it’s beginning to look like a suspicious glare.

“Again, señor, I am surprised you were unaware of these matters. Talon rarely loans her to other organizations, but even so Widowmaker’s reputation tends to precede her - ”

“Loans her?” Reaper chokes out, but it sounds like a bitter bark of someone speaking through a fan, if the fan was made of shards of glass and gravel. “Lo siento, but what does that mean?”

“Well, you know, Talon has a number of partner organizations across the globe. Sometimes some of them require certain...talents for situations they are dealing with,” Gerente explains, rubbing their fingers on the edge of their datapad awkwardly. Reaper’s jaw is still struggling to work, but his eyebrows have never failed him and continue to uphold their prestigious honor of giving his face some character and emotions (even behind the mask). His eyebrows frown a little at the response, and he thinks, amid his other churning thoughts, That sounds oddly...businesslike.

What fucking terrorist organization has official “cross-company team exercises” with other organizations?

So much of this sounds like Blackwatch and Over -

He kills that train of thought with a metaphorical shotgun shell and is all too happy to see its metaphorical body slump over in metaphorical death.

A metaphorical happiness, of course.

“I’ve been uh...a little out of the circuit recently,” he admits, figuring it was probably better just to own up to the situation and hopefully put a stop to the endless stream of dumbassery he had been committing himself to. “Specialized in a lot of...covert and clandestine ops for the U.S. government, under the cover of mercenary work. Cashed out and went rogue years ago but I’ve been laying low recently,” he lies, but it’s unnervingly close to the truth. Gerente’s eyes narrow and Reaper knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that his words will be relayed in a report very soon.

“And your...abilities? Was that part of that?” Gerente asks suspiciously.

“...Something of that nature,” Reaper lies again, but adds a twist of personal bitterness to sweeten the flavor, “You know the U.S. military - always toying around with shit it can’t really control, whether it’s the Manhattan Project or LSD or - ”

He gestures to himself as if that says it all.

…

It’s not a lie.

“Reaper” - that shadow beneath his skin, that second pulse in his veins, that murmur of another heartbeat in his chest, that skull that masks his own face -
Reaper has existed for decades.

For what it’s worth, Gerente seems to buy it. They nod understandingly, as if Reaper did in fact, say it all, and the manager of the base mutters coldly, “Governments in general are like that. The Spanish government, mierda, you should have seen some of the terrorism they brought upon the people under the Overwatch era.”

Reaper swallows a painful lump in his throat.

“You don’t say?” he attempts to be polite but really he’s struggling to keep up with the conversation. Gerente turns again and they start walking once more.

“Of course. You would have thought it was something out of the Middle Ages, some of the shit they were doing. But of course, there were Omnics present and everything. And everything in the name of peace.”

“Naturally,” Reaper sighs. That one came from a personal place in his cold, dark, dead heart.

They move through several more hallways, Gerente pointing out different rooms like the cafeteria (they all fucking eat together??), several supply areas, the gym (and exercise??), an indoor shooting range, a pool (????), and several rec rooms.

Is this a fucking terrorist base or a goddamn summer camp? Reaper wonders as they reach the living quarters area. Gerente is rambling on about dorm rooms while Reaper struggles to understand how this fucking nightmare of an organization that hounded Blackwatch for years had a fucking luxury jacuzzi.

“...Most of the agents are forced to bunk together, in groups of twos, threes, or fours, but squad leaders and individuals with...certain dispositions are given their own private rooms.”

“...You can just say that I’m too fucked up to be a good roommate,” Reaper sasses, “You don’t have to be polite about it.”

“Señor, I would never intend to insult you -”

“Look, dude, I’m glad that you’re running HR around here, but really, I get it, I consume souls, and it would be real fucking problematic if I drained the life outta some fresh faced Talon agent in my sleep,” Reaper rumbles sarcastically.

Gerente stops, as if Reaper had somehow stepped on their leash or something, and they have the sense to look moderately embarrassed, muttering, “Indeed, we have been informed that you are a...special case.”

Reaper scowls again

As the feeling of being ensnared buzzes in his skull.

“...Why do you keep saying it like that?” Reaper asks them cautiously. Gerente stares at him, their expression neutral, before they sigh, leaning over to press the button to the door nearest them. As the door slides open, Gerente bows their head, murmuring quietly, “On very rare occasions -”

Reaper darts his gaze to the room as it’s revealed -

“- An important member of our leadership will stop by our base -”
It’s just a rather extravagant, if clean and crisp lounge room - several plush chairs around a low, central glass table with a datapad on it, bright afternoon sunlight cutting in through a large bay window on the far side -

“- To assess us,” Gerente finishes softly, eerily gently, as Reaper sees -

GOD.

FUCKING.

DAMMIT.

The heat of his venomous fury rises in his chest -

His whole body writhes with a poisonous rage -

The shotgun materializes in his hand immediately -

Before he points it instinctively at her -

Her calm and cool, clean and crisp demeanor remains unmoved, sitting poised and precise in the plush chair directly opposite the door, sipping from a small, clean and crisp cup of tea -

“YOU -” he snaps, his voice boiling over, smoke into liquid, frothing obsidian reverting back to lava and plasmic, hellish earth and -

“Don’t be such a chancer, Reaper,” Moira states with an almost bored, almost irritated tone, “And put the gun down.” She sets her own teacup down on the glass of the table with a soft, delicate clink, before those mismatched eyes - one a starkly, bedeviled red, and the other a seasung blue - level at his mask.

Moira smirks wryly - not a wide, clever grin, but rather a twisted little upturn of her lips, like she has thought of a cute joke in the dark recesses of her mind - and she says coolly:

“We have business to discuss.”

Reaper does not move, his hand does not waver, his shotgun remains pointed towards her face, his chest rising and falling with steep fury. For whatever it’s worth, Moira does not look away, nor does she flinch...in fact, she barely even blinks, just staring at him with those uneven eyes.

Gerente looks passingly bored.

“...Can I leave now?” they ask the mercenary and the geneticist, before the base manager points a thumb back down the hallway, muttering, “I have other work to see to.”

“Yes, thank you, Gerente - that will be all,” Moira says from within the room, dismissing them.

Gerente nods to Reaper, adding managerially, “When you are finished with Señora O’Deorain, return to my office and I will show you to your room.” Reaper watches them turn to leave, before he lazily tilts his head back towards her, in the light of the room, rumbling, “...I could rip half your head off from here.”

“Spare me your melodrama,” Moira states dryly, her poise still unwavering but her mismatched eyes roll with her deadpan unamusement. She flicks her gaze back towards him, sighing heavily, “Get in here, and let us work out the details of your...contract.”

Reaper does not move, his hand does not waver, his shotgun remains pointed towards her face but -
Another pact with the witch? he wonders slowly to himself, ...Or a partnership to lead me out of this sweet Hell?

Because he’s tried the latter with her before.

...

It had not ended well.

“...Gonna need you to offer more than fine lines and blood signatures, O’Deorain,” Reaper rasps at her. He pauses before he adds dryly, “...Again.”

Moira continues to assess him with that blood-and-water gaze, before she says lowly, “...You have questions. I have some answers. Together, however, is the only way we can unlock the truth.”

They stay locked like that for a long second, neither of them moving, neither of them wavering, shotgun and eyes pointed towards each other until -

Reaper lowers his right hand, letting the shotgun dissipate into smoke, before he sighs heavily -

*Here I go again, digging my own grave.*

...For a second fucking time.

And then he steps into the room.

Moira gives him that sly little smirk again, before leaning forward and tapping something on the datapad. Immediately, the door slides shut behind him, and the soft, white-noise of electronic whirs and hums quiets to true silence in the background of the room.

“I have turned off the audio but left on the cameras,” Moira tells him, as she sits back in her chair again, setting her elbows on the armrests and steepling her fingers before her mouth, adding with a wry chuckle, “So we may speak freely.”

Oh.

Shit right out of his own fucking playbook.

*What a piece of work she is.*

Reaper glowers at her, before he rolls his head on his shoulders, cracking his neck, and basically throws himself into the plush armchair opposite her, closest to the door, like a child throwing a tantrum. He folds his arms across his chest, before he lifts his legs and clonks them heavily on the glass tabletop. Shockingly, the surface holds the pressure of his weighted combat boots, but the force of it shakes the whole table -

And sloshes some of Moira’s tea over the side, splattering it across the glass.

“...Really,” Moira states, as if she’s just made a casual observation of some scientific phenomenon, “It’s been six years and *this* is how you’re going to start your new career move?”

“Why don’t they know?”

That does not get her calm to break, but the piercing venom in Reaper’s quietly deadly question does get Moira to flinch a little. But Reaper
Does not move
And his glinting, razor-sharp gaze
Does not waver.

Moira turns her blood-and-water eyes back towards him, her breathing controlled, clean and crisp until she exhales deeply, opening her mouth to speak but -

“You didn’t want them to know,” Reaper mutters, his voice bitter and breaking but viciously victorious. Moira’s mouth clamps shut so tightly he can see the tension ripple up the muscles on the side of her head.

He laughs.

It’s a harsh sound, bitter and breaking, like obsidian glass being shattered, but viciously victorious too, like setting fire to a fuse. The words drip out of him like liquid smoke:

“Oh, O'Deorain, I’ve had six years to think about this,” Reaper says to her, voice low and rasping, glass smoke grating against barbed wire, “At first, I was furious that you destroyed our deal and me with it. And then I was irate that this damn organization had the gall to beg me to ‘join’ it. But it kept happening, over and over and over again - ‘Reaper, join us.’ ‘Reaper, work with us.’ ‘Reaper, together, we could rule the galaxy’ and all that Empire bullshit.”

Moira’s mismatched eyes watch him closely, her expression darkly attentive, and Reaper chuckles wryly, “And slowly - far, far too slowly - I figured it out. They didn’t know. They didn’t know the truth. About me...and about ‘Reaper.’”

For the first time since the “conversation” started, a scowl graces Moira’s face.

“...Were you mad when you realized it?” Reaper asks her, and the mask might hide his face, but it cannot hide the obvious grin in his voice, smug and smokily self-satisfied, “God, what I wouldn’t give to have seen the look on your face when you figured it out -”

“You’re looking at it,” Moira mutters bitterly, “It’s not wise to lie to your doctor, Reaper -”

“Yeah, well, blowing up your patients is a pretty fucking far cry from a remedy, doc,” Reaper growls at her but -

“I didn’t do that.”

A dead, bloated silence follows, until Reaper states furiously, “Bullshit you didn’t -”

“Do you want to know what I knew?” Moira states back with her own quiet, clean and crisp fury, “What I did do?”

Reaper now quiets up, settling back in his chair, but he tap tap taps his right, clawed index finger against his left arm guard, his bright red gaze never leaving her blood-and-water eyes -

“Because you...never told me the truth, all I knew was what Reyes’ had the potential to become,” Moira finally exhales steeply, her words sliding out of her like glass through her teeth, “And someone else took the initiative to…”

She stops, as if trying to pick the most scientifically accurate description, but Reaper decides to help her speed up the process - you know -
Since he had been a participant in Talon’s little “study.”

“They took the initiative to burn me fucking alive,” Reaper seethes, his tone somehow boiling like frothing obsidian plasma and freezing like icy smoke, “And burn our fucking deal while we were at it, too.”

Moira remains silent, and the two of them glare at each other until Reaper whispers hoarsely:

“Who.”

Moira glowers at him for a long moment, before she sighs slowly and sarcastically, “...I said I only have some of the answers -”

In an instant -

There is a jet-black shotgun pointed directly at her forehead -

With Reaper leaning across the table to press the lip of the barrel against her skin as he rasps, “Doctor-patient confidentiality, O’Deorain -”

“I said -” Moira snaps back, her blood-and-water eyes hardened in their fierce, unmoved resolve, “I only have some of the answers, Reaper, but if you continue to pressure me, you will get none of them. I do not know who gave the order to destroy Watchpoint: Geneva, but do you think I would have any qualms about telling you if I knew?”

Reaper weighs her words, tries to taste for the truth in them, like the way he can taste the flicker of life (and a shred of unlife) in her spirit.

If she is telling the truth, then killing her resolves nothing but reveals your true identity and intentions to Talon, he thinks to himself with unrepentantly calm fury, And you will have lost a valuable potential “ally” in all this.

...And if she is lying? Reaper counters himself, If she’s just trying to use me again?

A cold, hard-edged silence, like the blade of an obsidian knife, before his own voice -

Bitter and broken

Viciously victorious -

Urges him:

That’s a game two can play...right?

Reaper lets the shotgun linger against her head, before he flops himself back in the armchair, tossing the gun to the ground nonchalantly as he lifts his legs and clappers his feet on the table again. Moira’s resolve cracks from coldly determined strength to sardonic frustration again as she mutters dryly, “Were you always such a gurrier, or is this a new symptom of your condition?”

“I don’t know what that means, but I take offense to it,” Reaper sizzles back, folding his arms across his chest again. He rolls his head on his neck a little, rumbling lowly, “When did you figure it out?”

Silence answers him, lasting long enough that it pushes Reaper to the edge of creating another shotgun to get her to at least talk when Moira finally murmurs, “My...intuition knew very soon after the...detonation, and ‘Reaper’ started breaking into other Watchpoints.”
Though she cannot see it, Reaper raises an eyebrow at her skeptically, tilting his head coolly as he assesses her. Moira sighs, lifting her teacup again as she adds with a low, sarcastic wryness, “But I was not about to go making decisions on...feeling alone.” Reaper watches her as she takes a long sip, but when she pulls the cup from her lips, she scowls at him, saying with frustration, “But the...evidence was maddeningly difficult to track down.”

Reaper smirks.

Music to his ears.

“God, I bet that absolutely hurt on the inside, didn’t it?” he chuckles with supreme self-satisfaction. Moira shakes her head, setting her cup back down with a gentle clink as she almost hisses, “You have no idea - cracking open the secrets to life and evolution was far easier than sorting through the disaster of your ‘mercenary’ reputation, Reaper.”

His grin only gets wider as Moira adds with genuine bitterness and borderline anger, “Every person who should have had an answer - a real answer - only gave me responses like ‘Well, that’s just Reaper being Reaper,’ and ‘Haven’t you heard of him before?’” She shudders slightly with a shiver of disgust, muttering fiercely, “I don’t know how you managed to do it, but the entire world of mercenaries, extremists, spies, and even whole special operations agencies were... convinced that Reaper was simply...well, this...” she states with shock and horror, before gesturing up and down at him with her long pale fingers, as if more upset and disoriented by the very thought of his ‘persona’ being widely accepted by the criminal underworld than his actual physicality.

Because that’s the thing -

Reaper has existed for decades -

As a “mercenary” who had worked his way into criminal networks and gangs, toppling militant governments and violators of peace -

Waging war on war, fighting destruction with destruction, battling death with death

But with intentions and a pattern unbeknownst to anyone.

Reaper has existed for decades -

As the secret, secondary identity for him -

One of the greatest infiltrators, special operators, military tacticians, rogue combatants, and black ops commanders the world has ever seen.

A truth that had been known by only two people -

Him and his other half -

His soldier, his commander, his husband, his partner -

Until he had left him behind to rot in the apocalypse of their empire -

And only Reaper had remained standing in the ashes.

A fate he intends to spread to the whole world -

Reap ruins upon ruins -
Especially on Talon

And all who had wronged him.

Moira leans forward, grabbing her datapad. As she settles back into her seat, unlocking the tablet, she continues to shake her head in disbelief, muttering with frustration and slight awe, more to herself than to him, “I cannot believe - years of this. Years of no one keeping proper track of anything. Intelligence agencies the world over had only piecemeal information on you, all of them sporadic and completely jumbled -”

“Intelligence agencies the world over,” huh? Reaper notes to himself, filing that one away. They had always suspected that Talon had access to one or a few intelligence and special ops agencies, or were possibly even backed by some, but Overwatch and Blackwatch’s own internal organization and structures had fallen apart too quickly to pursue Talon to the highest levels.

She’s not lying - Moira never lies about her...“evidence.” She always gets too caught up in conveying information as accurately as she sees it, he adds to himself, writing a mental footnote to that previous comment. In other situations, perhaps she would’ve actually tried to hide that detail about having access to intel agencies from him, but frustrated and flustered as she is now, Moira O’Deoran is too wound up in her own thought-process to disengage and play the spy.

Scientists.

Always too focused on their information and analyses to remember to safeguard themselves.

That lumbering, hunched form shuffles through his mind, and Reaper scowls at the air, to no one in particular, before stuffing that image down the garbage chute where it belongs.

“Once I had the information, putting it all in order was not particularly difficult,” Moira rambles on, tapping at things on her datapad screen that Reaper cannot see. But the geneticist scowls to herself in annoyed concentration, adding bitterly, “But making sense of it all - that was the unsophisticated part. Insensible. Illogical. The dates and places and motivations were...just. Off.”

Reaper chuckles a low, liquid, viciously victorious laugh over her misery, and Moira tilts that glare at him. She snaps fiercely, “All phenomena has a rational and scientific explanation, even human behavior through things like psychology, sociology, economics, politics, history - even philosophy if we delve deep enough. All things, all behaviors, all patterns can be explained, but the sheer whimsy of ‘Reaper’s’ actions were beyond explanation.”

“What - doing it for six figures or more wasn’t good enough for your thesis?” Reaper taunts her. Moira just sneers, “It was obvious that money was actually the least likely explanation - ‘Reaper’ ran jobs with groups as wealthy as yakuza warlords and as impoverished as Central American revolutionaries. ‘Reaper’ would appear in anarchy gangs in the Southwestern United States only to vanish and reappear months later guarding CEOs in Chongqing, China.”

“Not all wealth is tangible, O’Deoran - sometimes the experience is the true reward to reap,” Reaper teases her with blunt sarcasm.

Moira looks utterly disgusted by that statement.

“God have mercy - is that what you told people when they hired you?” she asks with horrified curiosity.

“Oh God no,” Reaper retorts with a choking, coughing chortle, “Oh, hell nah - I told them whatever would get me hired.”
Moira rolls her eyes, muttering, “Of course you did.” She taps a few more things on her datapad, continuing as if the little exchange hadn’t happened, “I tried applying my intuitive hypotheses - ‘Reaper was working for Blackwatch,’ ‘Reaper was running missions for Overwatch’ - but even then, not everything matched up.”

A low, smoky rasp of a laugh starts in his chest -

As Moira lifts her blood-and-water eyes, glaring at him as she says coldly:

“There were so many missions, so many situations where you were without support, without contact - where you even fought against Overwatch and Blackwatch agents, or fled from them. No fatalities among Overwatch and Blackwatch agents in those moments, but certainly, ‘Reaper’ would put up a serious battle. And yet…”

Moira pauses, before saying darkly:

“No matter where you went, no matter what group or organization you fought for, no matter how alone or isolated you were...an Overwatch Strike mission or a Blackwatch covert operation always followed in the months or even years after - but there was also always enough time to remove ‘Reaper’ from those being acted against.”

The dry, smoke laughter turns into dark flames coated in dripping obsidian oil as Reaper taunts with vicious victory:

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains - however improbable -”

“- Must be the truth,” Moira says, completing the axiom. She scowls at him fiercely, saying with that low mixture of awe, horror, and frustration in her voice, “And that was when I knew - you had lied to me.”

“I prefer to think that I simply withheld pretty kickass truths from you,” Reaper chuckles, the smirk obvious in his tone. Moira points a long, accusatory finger at him, snarling, “You told me your genetic mutations were the result of the Soldier Enhancement Program -”

“And that wasn’t a lie,” Reaper states, unfolding his arms into a casual shrug, “I just never followed up that I already knew what those genetic mutations were capable of.”

*What I was capable of.*

Because he has been Reaper for decades.

He has always been willing to play the “bad guy” to him, the other who shouldered the burdens of the “hero.”

“...How long,” Moira half-asks, half-states, her mismatched eyes appearing to glow with a hunger for knowledge, for the truth. Reaper watches her coolly, before he rumbles, “I don’t have to tell you shit, O’Deorain -”

“It isn’t wise to lie to your doctor, Reaper -” Moira starts to threaten him lowly, but Reaper just rolls his eyes, tilting his head back with casual annoyance as he growls, “Not this argument again -”

“- Especially if you want me to help you find a cure.”

Reaper freezes.
He stays like that for a moment, eyes open wide, looking unstaringly at the ceiling.

He can hear the triumph in Moira’s voice as she taunts him:

“Or was the part where you wanted a method to fix your ‘situation’ a lie as well?”

…

Reaper has existed for decades.

He has been Reaper for decades.

And he would give anything

Not to be anymore.

To go find him - his soldier, his commander, his husband, his other - again -

Reaper lifts his head, turning it back towards her -

And drag them both down again -

He levels his gaze at her -

The way it should have been -

Behind the mask -

But not before -

Reaper grins.

He reaps his just reward

And razes Talon to the ground

And salts the earth and ashes left in the ruins.

“…You’ve got to be kidding,” Reaper taunts her sarcastically, because Moira cannot resist proving herself right all the time.

Reaper can already see the gleam of self-satisfaction in her blood-and-water eyes as he layers it on thicker, saying dryly, “Is that why you didn’t tell anyone? Because you didn’t want them to get to me first?”

Moira smirks, starting to twist her datapad around -

And Reaper’s viciously victorious smile deepens -

As she walks right into his claws.

“Have I ever lied to you?” Moira replies smugly, leaning forward to hand the datapad to him.

Reaper dematerializes his claws, leaving the touch-sensitive gloves on - he does not miss how her eyes flicker over his quantum materiality ability - before he reaches out and takes the tablet from her.

His whole body hums, alighting with joy as he reads:
He scrolls a little, noting the stylized DNA logo and the Arabic at the bottom of the page.

Well, well, just showing me your hand, huh? But I'll take what I can get, Reaper thinks, continuing to smirk as he scrolls to the next page -

ملخص النتائج

Reaper freezes.

The big, block paragraphs on the first page are all in Arabic.

Reaper pauses.

And then scrolls to the second page which is Also in Arabic.

No, he thinks with increasing panic, scrolling to the third page, No - aw, hell no -

“It’s only a draft at this point,” Moira states, her tone so self-satisfied that it’s incredibly obvious she has completely missed Reaper’s internal panic and his frantic, desperate scrolling, as well as the fierce tantrum he’s throwing in his head -

“- But this is what I meant!” Moira continues, steepling her fingers again and smirking darkly, “Together, we can finish what we started! Together, we can find the truth of your condition -”

Okay, okay, we’re not panicking, Reaper tells himself on the 127th page, still in Arabic, blinking himself back into calm, collected thoughts, We are not panicking. Translators are good these days! And we can pay someone to translate it.

...But then -

Who was going to actually explain the medical terminology and biotechnology in English to him?

The panic and frustration at the sheer injustice of it all sets back in -

“- I don’t...completely understand why you would want to give up what is effectively immortality for...anything, really,” Moira rambles blithely, but she adds in that weirdly optimistic tone she gets when she’s trying (and failing) to be cheerful, “But if you want that gone, then we can work on that! Or we can also work on further enhancements of your condition to make you indestructible -”

Okay, no, stop getting ahead of yourself, that calm, focused voice in the back of his head murmurs to him, You’ve been doing this for like, thirty years now - there’s no point in fucking this up this close to the end of the race. Reassess - what do you need still?

...Her completing the draft, for starters, Reaper thinks dryly, and the voice urges him quietly, So, one - you need her alive. And two?

We need to be “allies,” Reaper decides, before turning his gaze back to her -
“- Just think of what we could achieve with all the truths shared between us,” Moira states with raw, unhemmed excitement, “Think of all the wondrous secrets and potentials we could unlock! Think of what an actual achievement you could become.”

…

Yeah, nah -

That “we need to be ‘allies’” part is going to be hell.

Reaper stares at her for a moment, reminding himself slowly:

See if she can actually find a cure.

See if she’s lying about who destroyed Watchpoint: Geneva, or if she isn’t, look for any opening in the cracks somewhere.

See if you can pour molten fucking lava down those cracks.

Kill every ant that comes crawling out.

He slowly places the datapad on the table, his claws rematerializing easily. Moira watches him, muttering distantly, “How in the hell are you doing that -”

Find out how high up this cockbite of a conspiracy goes, he adds calmly to himself.

But then, behind the mask, he scowls slightly, noting one more:

...Find a way to get Amélie out.

He feels his throat go dry at that, though, thinking cautiously, ...If she’ll even have a will or mind capable of leaving.

“Alright,” Reaper finally states with some finality, lifting his gaze to Moira’s again as he says brusquely, “So what do I need to do?”

Moira’s blood-and-water eyes gleam at that, and Reaper refolds his arms across his chest, thinking viciously:

Good.

Let her think she has this.

It will make it so much sweeter when the fall finally comes.

“We will need to do an assessment of you soon,” Moira states with obvious excitement, reaching forward to grab her datapad. She quickly starts typing something, probably notes to herself, chattering away almost amicably, “I have no doubt that the explosion certainly altered you on some level, even if you did already have some of these - uh - abilities -”

...She might not know who gave the order, Reaper assesses her, But she’s definitely on board with reaping the results from it.

…

The phrasing of it makes him chuckle at his own joke.
“This will undoubtedly change some of my earlier solutions and test studies on you,” Moira continues, as only she ever could, sitting in his presence, completely unafraid, “But science is not always about a strict, linear progression.”

Reaper rolls his eyes, muttering dryly, “Story of my life.”

Moira either misses what he says, or hears him and chooses to ignore him. He wouldn’t be surprised by either of those.

“And of course, I will need more information,” Moira says, almost brightly enough to verge on the cusp of cheerful. She looks up from her datapad to give him a sly smirk, “So perhaps you ought to be honest this time and tell me the truth about when you actually discovered your...true potential, Reaper.”

Reaper freezes.

Behind the shadows of the mask

He shuts his eyelids, and her blood-and-water gaze disappears into darkness -

And another set of eyes resurface in his mind.

Blue, only blue.

As blue as the ocean beneath a midnight sky, studded with a sea of stars, lit by the burnished, tarnished golden glow of a biotic field, the air flooded with the hum of liquid life.

Shaking hands holding his face, fingers coated in blood, trembling in fear and relief.

The lingering feeling of a bittersweet and heartbroken kiss on his lips.

And breath -

Breath warm and soft, sewn with life and love, filled with a richly deep voice cracking under the pressure of his wholehearted horror -

“Gabe Gabe Gabe Gabe, no no no no, come back to me, don’t leave me, Gabe, I love you, I love you -”

How breath -

His breath -

Had tasted sweet like silky sugar water, mixed with life and love and heartbreak and horror and hope -

And how he had

breathed

life

for the first time

and
for the first time
the second pulse in his veins
had started to beat.

*Lie to her,* the voice in his head whispers to him.

(Reaper has existed for decades.)

*She does not get to have this.*

(*He has existed as Reaper for decades.*)

*The world does not get to have this.*

(A secret shared only by two people, of two lifetimes, intertwined.)

*They will burn alive before they are worthy of it.*

(A truth so alive not even Death could contain it.)

Reaper opens his eyelids.

(A truth so deathly not even Life could contain it.)

“Happened early on in the Crisis,” Reaper says, and the lie comes as easy to him as breathing, “Got reckless - emerged from a corner that I thought was cleared and a remaining Bastion tore me down.”

(A truth for better or worse, for intangible richness and verbal impoverishment, in weakness and in strength -)

“...You ever bleed out?” he continues distantly, not quite lying now, “When you feel your life slip out between your ribs and your chest can’t get enough air?”

(A truth to love and to cherish -)

Moira taps frantically. Reaper chooses his lie with cautious care and yet conveys it with casual coolness:

(A truth not even Death can part them from.)

“I could feel it even then - felt it like...a sensation under my skin. Like a switch inside me was hit.”

(A truth to last lifetimes -)

He leaves out the part where his lungs had drawn breath from a kiss steeped with all the rich sweetness of life and the desperate roughness of love, and how the life and love of *him* - his soldier, his commander, his other whole -

Had pulsed energy into his veins -

(- And beyond.)

*“Fascinating,”* Moira says excitedly, and Reaper can tell she’s bought it.

“...So that’s it, huh?” Reaper drawls, lolling his head, pushing thoughts of blue eyes and blue breaths
of life from his mind and refocusing on the conversation. He settles back into his chair, turning his attention to Moira again, asking blunting, “What now? Blood tests? A heart monitor?”

*More of the torture you and your “allies” inflicted on me before the Fall?*

“Oh no, well -” Moira states with a different sort of bluntness, “Yes, those, probably, at some point, along with other…*tests*, but for now I must return to my main duties - I was not anticipating your...*return* so suddenly -”

“Wait,” Reaper asks with genuine shock, tensing slightly, “I’m not coming with you?”

“What,” Moira half-stammers, half-states, blinking at him, before she scowls, snapping, “Of course not.”

“...Why. Not,” Reaper demands, sitting up a little more, feeling the second pulse thunder stronger in his veins. Moira taps a few things on her datapad and then turns it off, rolling her mismatched eyes as she mutters, “Your decision to join Talon has far-reaching consequences - we must be *wise* about how we proceed with this...”

...Oh.

The *truth* sinks into him like an anchor.

*(Why had she never told Talon the truth about him? About “Reaper?”)*

“...*You’re afraid.*”

Moira quiets immediately as his words crack through the air like the deadliest whisper, soft and yet stilling. Those blood-and-water eyes return to his mask, and Reaper murmurs with words dripping from him like liquid smoke:

“You’re afraid of them. You don’t want them to know - you’re afraid of what they’ll do if they know who I am...and what I am.”

And that -

*That -*

Is when Reaper figures out his *first real answer.*

*(Why did she never tell Talon? About him? About “Reaper?”)*

“...You don’t trust them,” he states, an ending and a beginning, a finality that is infinite and boundless.

He knows it’s the truth.

Moira gawks at him openly, as if shocked at how quickly he’s called her out, before she *glares* outright, practically snarling, “*Of course* I don’t trust them! Talon isn’t about *trust* - Talon is about putting the world back on the path of *progress* and *advancement.*”

...Oh.

That’s another question answered.

...Surprisingly easily, actually.
“...Ambitious,” Reaper states, raising his tone as if he’s impressed, but internally, he thinks coldly, And arrogant as fuck.

But I guess that makes Talon the uncanny mirror of Overwatch, unfortunately.

And I will be thrilled to help destroy it just as you destroyed us.

“Indeed,” Moira states, a bit placated by his tone. She runs her fingertips along the beveled edges of her datapad, saying with a more...patient, calmer tone, “The...issue - let’s put it that way - is that not everyone within the...decision-making circles of Talon agree on what that means. In practical terms, of course.”

In the cool shadows of his mask, Reaper’s eyes narrow skeptically at that.

“So...some people want - what, exactly?” he asks carefully, yet with enough of his careless bravado to lure her into a false sense of security about his nonchalant persona. Reaper waves a hand boredly, muttering, “Cleaner air in bases? Better cars for ambushes? Better healthcare for when an agent gets shot? Livable wages? Cooler uniforms?”

It works, because Moira laughs that high, hard-edged snarky sound she has when she thinks she’s better than someone else, chuckling wryly, “You could put it that way. I guess the best way to summarize it is...a matter of...priorities.”

Reaper’s scowl only darkens as Moira adds blithely, “Some people want to...return to the way the world was before the Crisis...before Overwatch. A return to stability, if you will.”

But then, the geneticist frowns slightly, perplexed more by some inner thought than anything occurring in the conversation between them. She sighs slowly, “...It is an...understandable position, I suppose. A place of comfort. Privilege. Power. A controlled, understandable, previously-tested model, one with proven results.”

And her scientific method-minded brain can’t exactly fight the...allure of that, Reaper tells himself. Anything with evidence and proven results will attract Moira to it, even if it is oddly opposed to her actual, internal philosophy.

An odd quirk of her intelligence.

Moira had always called it a “strength” - the ability to see all possibilities, hypotheses, and ideas, she had tried to tell him -

Had tried to convince herself.

But he, him, had always seen it as a…

Weakness

Of her normally diamond-sharp mind.

...An exploit in her internal coding. A flexibility that bends and shifts and locks itself into circular feedback loops of problems.

Problems he, him, has always been willing to try and manipulate.

She sees the appeal of stability, of a static sort of “peace” where Talon does what it wants, Reaper notes, but immediately adds, But she isn’t...satisfied with that -
Right as Moira herself states:

“Others want to move forward from where we are now - upon the global stage left in the ashes of Overwatch’s destruction. Without Overwatch to...restrain us, we could achieve such...marvelous changes.”

Reaper does not like the way her eyes - distant and unseeing - seem to alight with that idea, the blood-red one flaring like fire, and the water-blue one deepening into the abyss.

Of course that option appeals to her more.

He’s not remotely surprised -

But he also isn’t above completely using this to his advantage.

...

Time to sow the seeds.

“...And somehow, me agreeing to - I don’t know - live and work in this base has...displaced an argument, huh?” Reaper asks, again using that very precise, very careful “I don’t care” tone. Moira assesses him cautiously before she says coolly, “I don’t know yet, not exactly. But ‘Reaper’ is...well known enough to attract attention. Someone will try to use you.”

You mean, someone other than you? he thinks dryly, but he says aloud, “I’m a mercenary, right? Isn’t that what I’m here for? Pay me and use me? ...Wait, hang on, that was bad phrasing -”

But what Moira says next -

“If that is what you think you are -” Moira states with a brittle edge to her words, “- Then you clearly lack an understanding of your true potential.”

- Catches him off-guard.

“Wait, what,” Reaper states with genuine confusion, but Moira shakes her head, leans forward, and takes her tea. As she drinks the last sip of it, she sighs, muttering lowly, “A disappointing revelation, to learn that you have possessed such...incredible gifts of evolution, and yet never recognized them for their full benefits and possibilities.”

In the shadows of his mask, Reaper frowns outright.

Something is wrong.

He’s missing something.

Something important.

“But fortunately, that is why I am here,” Moira states with bold finality, putting her cup back on the table. She gives him that eerie smirk again, laughing darkly, “It is fortunate for everyone that my greatest talent lies in understanding, analyzing, and improving the truths of humankind’s greatest and most secreted potentials...and progressing those to their true worths.”

“...Why do I feel like you’ve just insulted me somehow?” Reaper asks her suspiciously. Moira just grins at him, before slipping her datapad to her left hand and rising from her seat. The geneticist laughs airily at him, “I suppose you should take your...unique brand of intellect as a compliment, not as an insult. We cannot all be visionaries, of course.”
Reaper follows her actions, sliding his feet off the table and rising from the plush chair, grumbling darkly, “Remember who you’re talking to, O’Deorain - if it wasn’t for me, there wouldn’t be a world for this organization to screw over. And you wouldn’t even be alive.”

“Spare me the ‘I fought in the Crisis’ monologue, Reaper,” Moira sighs sarcastically, stepping around the table to head to the door. She rolls her eyes in his direction, saying slyly, “I fought too, you know. I was a medic for the United European Defense.”

“Fine, let me rephrase that,” Reaper mutters as they approach the door. As Moira hits the unlock button, Reaper rumbles furiously, “If it wasn’t for me, this world would be overrun by human-hating robots, with the vast majority of humanity wiped from the face of the planet. And you would be little more than a hiccup in history.”

“...Charming, as usual,” Moira states with utter sarcasm as the door slides open. They step out into the hall, and Moira turns to the right, heading back down towards the exit to the airhub. As she does, she calls back to him bluntly, “Stay here, do what Gerente tells you, and I’ll contact you when I’m ready for the next step.”

“When I see your name on my paycheck, I’ll listen to you,” Reaper snarks back, but internally he thinks with a viciously victorious tone:

More time for me to get oriented...

And organized.

Reaper watches her go, before he slowly steps up to the nearest comms device. He dematerializes the claw on his left index finger and presses it to the main menu. The options are listed in four languages - English, Spanish, French, and German - but he quickly finds the “Manager/Gerente” button and taps it. The comms device flickers to a “waiting” screen, and Reaper shortly finds himself tapping his still-clawed right index on the wall next to it.

After what feels like the longest minute of his life, the comms device finally clicks, and Gerente’s bored, monotone voice ripples through the speakers:

“¿Qué?”

“O’Deorain left,” Reaper rumbles at it, “As expected, she just took off with her head in the clouds. What should I do now?”

There’s a pause, and then -

“Wait right there, señor Reaper - I will show you the rest of the facility.”

The comms device clicks off and returns to the main menu. Reaper rematerializes the claw on his left index finger, and then folds his arms, tapping his foot impatiently. Various Talon agents and crew members pass by him, glancing towards him, before he catches them staring. They avert their gazes and continue on their way, adding haste to their steps. After a moment, Gerente appears almost magically from around the corner, and Reaper is convinced they’re actually the stealthiest agent in the whole base.

“I hope your conversation with Señora O’Deorain went well,” Gerente says with a flatly polite tone. Reaper snorts with derision, “As well as sleeping in a bed of thorns.”

“Ah, well,” Gerente says dryly, “She is about as pleasant, yes. Now, follow me.”
Reaper turns and follows the base manager down the hall, to what appears to be dorm rooms and living quarters. Gerente gestures to a door, saying, “As I was describing before your appointment with Señora O’Deorain, most agents room in groups of twos or threes. Certain allowances are made for special cases, such as yourself.”

“You know how to make a guy feel so wanted,” Reaper drawls sarcastically, punching the button on the side and the door slides open. Inside is a clean room - single bed, single desk, bright lights still, a gun rack (like he needs one, amateurs), a dresser…

Behind the skull mask, he outright glares. They might as well have used the Overwatch Watchpoint floor plans. The room is almost identical to the layouts given to Overwatch agents.

“Cosy, sí?” Gerente asks, giving him that weird smile again. Reaper tilts his head a little, trying to hide how much the situation is freaking him the fuck out.

“It’s a room, alright.”

“You see the datapad on the desk?” the base manager asks. Reaper does, in fact, notice the rectangular pad on the desk in the corner. Gerente continues, “That’s for you. It has Talon’s internal messaging system so you will receive immediate messages regarding your assignments and missions. Be sure to send me the account you want to use for all transactions.”

“Is it field-ready?” Reaper grumbles but Gerente just gives that stupid chuckle again and states, “No, but I will be giving you field comms when you need them.”

“Good to know,” he answers dryly. Gerente gives him a small wave and sets off down the hallway, no doubt to do some nefarious HR and accounting for some Talon CEO.

Feels a disturbing amount like Special Forces orientation, Reaper thinks to himself as he steps into the room. He hears the door slide shut behind -

It doesn’t click shut.

He whirs around, shotguns materializing as he summons them and aims them right at headlevel to whoever is there -

Widowmaker is there, keeping the door pried open. Reaper stops, guns still level with that stupid camera headset she wears. They stay like that until suddenly -

“What are you doing here?” she practically hisses at him, her voice low and urgent and furious. He recoils a little from the intensity, and then says at a normal volume, which feels stupidly loud for the situation she’s put them in, “I’m joining fucking Talon, what does it look like?”

“Looks to me like a fucking idiot got himself trapped,” she mutters with a shocking amount of rage, her petite facial features scrunched up with venom, “They may look stupid, but this is no place for a fallen king.”

“Wha -”

“You should leave. As soon as possible,” Widowmaker snaps. She goes to relax her grip on the door, but the moment it starts to slide closed again, a clawed hand reaches out to stop it.

“You know,” his voice is low and dangerous and furious like hell itself. Widowmaker steps back a bit in surprise as he looms over her, large and imposing and a reminder that otherworldly terrors do exist. “HOW do you know.”
It is not a request of information, but rather a demand.

“...I’m not...” she stammers, and he can see her will faltering, breaking, and he knows - knows he could ruin her, steal what little life force she has, reap the remains of Gerárd and Ana that are in her soul and feel a bit of their warmth seep into his lifeless formless self and feel renewed at how small segments of their love would feel inside of him.

But the love wouldn’t be his.

It would always be hers.

She who had killed them.

He doesn’t know if he wants to destroy her or help her, to relish in the relief that she’s still alive or lose himself in the fury of their deaths.

He wants, he wants, he wants.

The color blue rises again in his heart and he consumes, he consumes, he consumes.

But something inside her steels itself and a hard glint returns to her eyes, just as he was on the verge of doing something truly terrible and horrific. He falters in himself. When she sees the monstrosity in his eyes back down, she sees her opening. Like a true sniper, her words are harsh and well-aimed.

“I am not fucking blind - anyone with half a brain could figure out who you are,” she snaps back at him, and Reaper finds himself shrinking a little, back to his normal proportions.

“What?” he snarls, the fog of his mind still wrapped up in its own hatred and pain.

“Dual shotguns? All black? A fucking skull?” Widowmaker rolls her eyes, “You are as easy to read now as you were ten years ago, Reyes.”

“DO NOT - ”

“Worry not, mon cherie,” she bites back, her own words snapping and sharp and he’s taken in by the veracity in them, “Tattling on you will only bring me paperwork and a headache, and all I want is a nap right now.” She flicks her hair haughtily, and Reaper feels the urge to take her soul die and the urge to ram his head against the wall grow.

“So what do I call you?” he grumbles, wanting his life to be over. Should have let the ship get shot down into the sea. “You better fucking call me Reaper around other people - I ain’t about to have this shit go pear shaped because you slip up and call me the wrong name, Lacroix - ”

He won’t deny it.

This is the part that really scares the everloving shit outta him.

All of her haughty, snarky emotion seems to slide off her face in a single motion, and he jerks back from the empty, blank stare. She looks eerily doll-like, her pale skin unnatural and cold even in the bright lights, her eyes large and round and glassy. There’s a slight twitch to one of her eyebrows, but otherwise her face grows cold and still and lifeless.

“Holy fuck, I didn’t mean - I’m sorry, uh...” he stammers as she blinks unnaturally slow and holy shit the lazy, dead roll of her eyes has his skin crawling.

“W-Widowmaker?”
Her eyebrows frown before anything else moves, and suddenly her blinking becomes more normal, more even-paced, and she seems to pull herself together, as if her joints are connected with strings. Her head straightens back up, and there’s a weird glow back in her eyes. The venom has returned, but in a strange way he’s grateful to see anything other than that emptiness.

“What?” she snaps at him and he gasps, growling out, “N-nothing. Just...thanks for the warning, I guess?”

She sneers, “You should actually heed it, you idiot,” before turning on her heel and storming off down the hallway.

...I probably should, Amélie.

If only I wasn’t such a sucker for problem cases.

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To: -scrambled-
From: Zaragoza Base
Subject: About Reaper

Apologies for the message, Minister O’Deorain, but you left the base so suddenly that I was not able to ask you:
Should I send out the report on Reaper joining the organization, or would you prefer to do that?

I understand that you are quite busy with your return to Oasis, but you insisted so heavily on meeting him with privately that I am wondering if you wish to address the other directors personally.
El Gerente de Zaragoza

---

To: Zaragoza Base
From: -scrambled-
Subject: About Reaper

Aha, yes, thank you for asking me, Gerente - I must apologize, for the matter slipped my mind entirely. I shall personally address the other directors, and explain to them how my meeting with our new mercenary went. It is not usually my preference to see to matters personally, but in this case, I find it imperative to speak to my fellow directors on a more focused level.
Inform me if Reaper provides more information on where he has been the last few years. You will message me before you message any other directors on these matters.

Best,
Minister O’Deorain

--------
As of this morning, the Zaragoza Base has contracted out the mercenary with the codename of “Reaper.” You may contact the manager of the base for use of his skills and services.

As per previous discussions, Reaper’s home base has been restricted to Zaragoza for use of the major Mediterranean ship hub located there. He will not be moved to any director’s personal base, including my own. The manager of the Zaragoza Base has agreed to monitor his interactions with the Talon agents stationed there.

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[Private responses to [Moira.O’Deorain]]:

[Response [01] from [Name encrypted]]:

Didn’t you land at Zaragoza this morning, minister?

> [Reply from [Moira.O’Deorain]]: I did.

> > [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: What...luck.

> > > [Reply from [Moira.O’Deorain]]: Ha. Neither you nor I believe in luck or coincidence, my friend.

> > > > [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: What are you planning?

> > > > > [Reply from [Moira.O’Deorain]]: Me, personally? Nothing momentous. But I supposed you have something in mind?

> > > > > > [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: Perhaps. I wish to...see how certain dice fall first, however.

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[Response [02] from [Name encrypted]]:

I suppose if I want to use Reaper for a mission, I will need to clear it with the Zaragoza manager?

> [Reply from [Moira.O’Deorain]]: Well now, that was rather fast of you. You already have a mission in mind? In the Mediterranean?

> > [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: A mission in mind, sí, naturalmente. But in the Mediterranean...no.

> > > [Reply from [Moira.O’Deorain]]: Are you sure you are not overstepping your bounds?

> > > > [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: The mission requested Widowmaker’s assistance, but I do not feel easy, sending her on this type of mission alone.
[Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: Be careful, my friend. If it is the mission I have heard about, your...intentions are rather easy to read, even from this distance.

[Reply from [Name encrypted]]: Is science not about taking risks sometimes? Pushing the boundaries? Advancing progress? Sometimes, we must experiment to create a new result.

[Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: ...I suppose I am intrigued on what “results” you think you might find from this...“experiment.”

[Reply from [Name encrypted]]: Davvero, I am mostly interested in finally using a Death Agent. Our failure to transform Reyes still stings, even after all these years.

[Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: Yes, that is true. I look forward to your “results.”

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[Response [03] from [Name encrypted]]:

About damn time. I was starting to wonder if Reaper would ever come around. He tell you what supersoldier program made him? I could never get Reaver to get an answer from him.

> [Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: Such a warm welcome, my friend. And Reaper was made by Blackwatch. Or so he says.

>> [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: I fucking knew it. Damn Reyes - using Overwatch’s resources and budget to turn one of his Blackwatch lapdogs into a Death Agent. And of course, he wasn’t willing to try anything himself until the situation with Morrison and the UN started to turn on him. Reyes never had an issue using someone else to take the fall. Did Reaper tell you anything else?

>> [Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: Nothing useful yet, but it may take some digging. I suspect Reyes destroyed all information on Reaper in the Blackwatch databases before Overwatch fell. We may have to start our research from the ground up.

>>> [Reply from [Name encrypted]]: A real shame, but unfortunately, that’s nothing new for us. Let me know if you need any help getting started again.

>>> [Reply from [Moira.O'Deorain]]: For now, my funding through the University of Oasis should be enough to cover the expenses, and if the work with the United European Defense pans out properly, we should see more resources and support coming in shortly. But I will contact you if any early complications arise.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, a reminder that Reaper has NO IDEA what he’s doing.

Word of caution, friends - when it doubt about a character’s motivation or methods in this fic, ASSUME THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY’RE DOING.

Hanlon's razor and all that shit.
Talon attack on Oil Mogul outside of Istanbul leaves authorities baffled

Istanbul, Turkey - The Jandarma are calling the incident “strange and most bizarre.”

Sometime last night, numerous individuals broke into the mansion of oil mogul Ahmet Hasan Demir in a coordinated assassination on the businessman. Demir’s body was discovered in his office by his secretary this morning, but so were the bodies of six Talon operatives just outside the office windows.

“It was truly an odd scene, unlike any I’ve ever seen,” Commander Ali Yusuf Kaya spoke in a brief press conference this morning, “It appears that, after assassinating Demir, the Talon agents turned and shot each other wildly.” The military police are refusing to divulge case-sensitive details, but this bizarre case has terrorism experts scratching their heads.

“Talon attacks grow more aggressive and prevalent by the day, but this is extremely rare,” our anti-terrorist correspondent Elif Azra Aksoy stated to us over a conference call on the attack. “It is not unheard of for terrorist groups like Talon to fraction within themselves, or to disagree over things such as ideology and methods, but to do so in a very public manner is unusual.”

Leaving dead agents behind is not unheard of for Talon, the terrorist organization that has only grown in the last few years. Despite becoming a relatively significant international terrorist group, the organization’s goals and objectives remain vague beyond an apparent desire to see the world a little less stabilized. Talon rarely recovers dead or wounded agents after a mission, and almost never retaliates for missions that go awry like last night’s attack.

The coordinated and seemingly unemotional responses to death and failure leave some terrorism experts concerned.

“Talon’s patterns are unpredictable and fast. They operate in an extremely militarized manner, leaving fallen agents behind and moving quickly past failed attacks,” said a press secretary for the
CIA. “This is very different from other known terrorist groups, which frequently retaliate or operate on emotional responses to efforts to stop them.”

Major international players like the United States, Russia, China, and Mexico have been quick to condemn Talon and its attacks, but have been slow to react to or stop the organization’s spread. Russia, a longtime ally of Turkey, has stated that it found last night’s attack on Demir to be “utterly horrific” and that it will continue to support Turkey through these difficult times.

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**Soldado: This is my rifle.**

Monday, June 29, 2076; 4:07 am - Colorado, United States.

He’s almost embarrassed at how easy breaking into Watchpoint: Grand Mesa is.

With uncaring, obnoxious steps, 76 picks his way across the hall, moving ungraciously between the bodies of concussed - possibly dead - Helix guards. All it had taken were some smoke bombs, sonic grenades, flash bangs, and a heavy duty civilian rifle to let him just fucking stroll in.

*I guess Helix doesn’t recruit well outside of the Middle East and Europe,* 76 notes, his left foot “accidentally” knocking into some guy’s shin. The “international” security corporation had scored some sweet contracts with big, “cost-cutting” militaries and small, insecure governments alike, but it struggled to perform well outside of its home turf around the Mediterranean.

*Or maybe they just thought managing ex-Overwatch bases in the U.S. would be a fucking free ride,* 76 thinks derisively. Compared to having to fight off Talon agents, mafias, gangs, and other criminal organizations elsewhere in the world, working in the “relatively stable” United States appeared to be a walk in the fucking park to most “heavy arms” security companies.

Until he had come along.

He was rapidly becoming known as a one-man army, a vigilante hellbent on fucking the U.S. government over for seemingly little except to ruin a bunch of military and security guards’ day and steal the occasional weapon. He had already hit Watchpoints Montreal and Great Lakes, along with a bunch of “random” financial institutions and high level tech companies.

The government and media were already trying to make him out as some sort of crazy ex-supersoldier set on building a unique brand of home terrorism, but 76 found the explanation fucking laughable. He hadn’t taken any money from the banks or institutions - only names - and the only technology he’d stolen from the tech companies were for the visor and his special datapad.

Oh yeah. Add the visor to the list of “shit that made solo-storming Watchpoints easy.”

Subconsciously, a gloved hand brushes gently along the cheek of it as he traces the underside of the screen glass. It was a work of art at this point, and fuck, in every life, 76 had never been an artist. He had found the plans for it buried deep on the servers of the Montreal Watchpoint - only prototypical, in the process of being hammered out for Blackwatch, stamped with the codename of WNSTN in the corners of the files. But 76 had taken those plans, merged some of the design functions with the Talon mask he’d stolen, and modified it to include some of his personal touches from his old eyeglass. And yeah, okay, he’d also added a bunch of stolen tech.
It had been a fucking pain in the goddamn ass to build, but holy hell, 76 felt like he could actually call himself an artist for this one.

With a pleased sigh to himself, 76 bends down and drags the last body (dead? unconscious? who gives a fuck) along with him to the giant computer station at the end of the room.

It’s a beefy thing, all slick screens and impressive towers. Apparently decommissioning Overwatch hadn’t meant getting rid of all of its stuff, as not only were the physical properties like Watchpoints and Blackbases still around, but so was all the actual physical shit like the computers, armor, weapons, and other equipment. Years ago, Jack Morrison would have scoffed at the notion that disbanding Overwatch would be a way for every country it had a base in (which was a lot of them) to get a hold of its technology and intellectual properties.

Now, though, 76 is pretty sure that played some part in the disbandment.

76 draws up before the main computer in the room, sidling himself into the seat in front of it. He yanks the body along, peels off a glove, and slaps the hand on the print scanner. It beeps once, twice, a soft orange light reading the palm and fingertips, and then beeps once more, the screens flashing alive from their “locked” states.

*I don’t know why they make this so easy,* the soldier grumbles to himself, *It’s really not that difficult to get a hold of some administrative nerd’s handprint.*

After all, it just takes some special grenades, a rifle, and a fucking tactical visor.

Also maybe Supersoldier Enhancement Drugs™ or whatever. Add that to the list too.

76 pulls out his datapad and docks it to the main tower. He taps through the command program until he configures it properly and sets it to ripping the files off the Grand Mesa computer. Most of it will be boring clerical and inventory shit, but it’ll cover a couple week’s worth of reading materials. If he’s lucky, he’ll find either interesting tech plans or - better yet - old Petras or Overwatch information that hadn’t been fully wiped.

And that will give him his next point to seize.

A small extraction display pops up on the main monitor and 76 leans back into the chair, knowing it’ll take awhile. He should probably go and make sure the guards are fully knocked out.

*Just put a fucking bullet in their heads and be done with it,* a savage, feral, irate part of him growls. He rolls his neck and the soldier in him responds calmly, logically:

*Why waste ammo on those pieces of shit?*

So he settles in, making sure another sonic grenade is ready in case he hears any of them stir behind him. He opens up the internal messaging system, figuring he might as well start his fucking homework early, and begins scrolling through the messages.

*Supplies sent to Area 51.*

*A weekly We’re cleaning out the common room fridge reminder.*

*Safe weapons handling is to be practiced at all times.* That one at least sounds entertaining.

*Supplies inbound from the CIA,* that should be a good one.
Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

76 clicks on that one without hesitation.

A heavy fusion bomb, the thought surges up from the depth of his anger, seething quiet yet intense, A fucking FUSION BOMB. 76 is about as much of a physicist as he is an artist, but he’s been around technology, science, military science, and military science technology to know that a “heavy” fusion bomb is

Fucking

Big

Bad

News.

Leave it to the assholes who had dropped two atomic bombs, made a fuckton more, sent the CIA to fuck the world over, invented the Omnica Corporation, created a Supersoldier program, and developed plasma pulse technology to think “you know, that’s really just not enough, we can really go a step further” and make a goddamn FUSION BOMB.

Fucking assholes learned nothing from Australia, 76 rages inwardly. 76 isn’t a scientist or an artist, but he’s also not an idiot (not completely, at least) - he knows countries have been experimenting with fusion technology since the Crisis had ended. After the disaster in Australia, most had stated publicly that they “were slowing or stopping their research,” but 76 had often seen classified information on fusion tech and weaponry pass through his desk at Overwatch.

And since he hadn’t been a complete idiot, he had taken some of the tech information for Overwatch.

It was one thing to tinker around with fusion tech in accelerators (admittedly, a very stupid thing, considering, you know, Lena) or even personal-level weaponry (his own, rough, fractal-scarred hands are a testament to that), but building a bomb with the equivalency of Omnium fusion cores?

Absolutely the fucking stupidest of them all.

The message pops open, and 76 opens the chain of responses, reading quickly and furiously.

Send to: General Asshole

Sent from: CIA Asshole

Subject: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb

General Asshole:

Development on the heavy fusion bomb is reaching completion. When it is ready for extraction, we will deliver it to Grand Mesa via U.S. military train leaving from Dorado through Veracruz, Tamalpais, Nuevo León, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Texas, New Mexico, and into Colorado. There is noted Talon activity in Chihuahua, just on the border with the U.S., and increasingly concerning activity from Deadlock in New Mexico.

Your team along with Helix security members should be ready to meet us at the Colorado border.
CIA Asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To CIA Asshole:

Are you fucking serious. Train? What is this, 1860? Why don’t we just use fucking stage coach instead.

Also why the fuck didn’t you use our classified subject title. Your time in Dorado is top level work, for fuck’s sake, at least act like it.

General Asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To General Asshole:

The CIA has found that an increasing amount of information is being leaked about this project and other developmental projects within these joint U.S.-Mexico-LumériCo military programs. It is unknown where exactly the leaks are coming from. Several of our operatives here in Dorado suspect Portero himself is leaking information to his other investments, but we cannot rule out the possibility of compromised project members or compromised U.S. military personnel being the sources. And while unlikely, it could still be an unknown party accessing information and leaking it.

Due to this information breach, several different methods of transportation are being sent to different parties involved to see what arises.

My bad on the classified subject line. I have not been sleeping well.

CIA asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To CIA Asshole:

What the actual fuck. That’s even more concerning. This is not the kind of project to be playing
undercover cop with. Need I remind you we are dealing with a fucking fusion bomb here? Heads will roll when - not if - this goes south.

You want me to bring this fucking dangerous weapon of mass destruction on ground level, archaic transportation through numerous civilian states and through pockets of radicalized terrorist groups instead of running standard heavy transport aircraft procedures with increased escort crafts, which would not only be safer but also faster? Is that the fucking story you CIA assholes are spinning here? All to patch up your own fucking problems?

General Asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To: General Asshole

The CIA Director has already approved this plan.

CIA Asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To CIA Asshole:

You bet your fucking toasted ass the President is hearing about this, you dumbass CIA fucks.

I want zero liability for me and my team when this gets fucked up.

General Asshole

---

Re: Respond immediately: development on and transportation of heavy fusion bomb.

To General Asshole:

Rest assured, sir, the CIA is prepared to fully accept the consequences of this plan.

CIA Asshole
76 sits back heavily into the chair, the anger and confusion threaten to overwhelm him, to swallow him into a pit of seething, grieving rage that makes him want to put a bullet into every person involved in this assfuckery of a project

But he’s spent far too many years of managing this kind of actual bullshit to feel threatened by his emotions on this front.

Step 1: the first layer

On the surface level, the CIA, U.S. military, Mexican military, and LumériCo are constructing a fusion bomb and it requires transportation to Grand Mesa.

Step 2: the complications

Information about the project is being leaked by unknown sources to unknown parties. Therefore, the CIA is sending a number of misdirection plans to possible leaks.

Step 3: the catch

And here’s the real rub.

The CIA Asshole states the plan is to catch the leakers, by checking to see who comes after the bomb for a certain method of transportation.

If this were the case, they would send multiple fake bombs on the routes and see which ones are hijacked to trace back to the original misinformation source.

In this scenario, all the bombs are fake while the real bomb (if it even exists) is locked up in a secure location known to only a trusted few.

If this were the case.

76 has seen a lot of misdirection missions in his day - even led a few of them - and this one

This one reeks of being a misdirection misdirection.

Everything about it was too heavy-handed: the “I fucked up our subject line” title, the overbearing General, blatantly stating the misdirection plans, even outlining the general fucking route of a “fake transportation method.” Everything about it was disorganized, messy, and downright unprofessionally dangerous.

Which meant this was probably a trap.

The real problem, though, was 76 had no idea for whom.

The leakers thing might also be a misdirection, but he suspects it isn’t. You don’t lay a trap of this magnitude without knowing it is, well, going to actually fucking net something.

76 mulls it over. There are three immediate suspects: two listed in the email exchange, and one unstated.

Talon is the most obvious one. If the CIA is attempting to crack down on Talon operations in North America, pulling them out with a tantalizing “fusion bomb” seems like an easy fucking way to do it. Not much is known about Talon, except that they fucking love military and ex-Overwatch tech and
will go to great lengths to get their hands on it.

But since no one can decide if Talon is a fucking smart terrorist organization or a fucking dumb one, this still seems like a “high risk, low reward” scenario.

Next is Los Muertos, which has an area of operations along the Gulf Coast of Mexico and even a major hotspot in Dorado itself. 76 had always assumed they were a simple petty crime or anarchy gang, but he’s not dropping the possibility of something more. Rumors were circulating that Los Muertos was in the process of acquiring heavy arms from the black market, and 76 knows they have anti-Portero, anti-government leanings, making them political and social in focus.

Last is Deadlock, which causes the anger in 76 to flare up a little before he stamps it back down. Gabriel and Blackwatch had supposedly cleaned up Deadlock years ago, but somehow they were still around and still fucking things up in the power vacuum of the Southwest.

At this point, though, 76 wouldn’t be surprised if an ex-Blackwatch agent had actually organized their return -

No, Jack says to him calmly, Do not believe their lies.

They had to get all that information about Blackwatch from somewhere, he insists darkly. Where better than Blackwatch itself?

Focus on the task at hand. Deadlock is back. Solve the problem first, think of the source later. Jack’s voice sounds a lot like his own, but gentler, kinder, more patient.

But 76 has no time for Strike-Commander Jack Morrison. Not anymore.

This is precisely the issue that let a fucking conspiracy invade Overwatch in the first place, 76 growls to the overstuffed halls of his mind. We might not figure it out right this fucking second, but we need to put this shit together, asshole. Even if it wasn’t some Blackwatch agent, something or someone somewhere got Deadlock back together.

And as Gabriel always said, there’s no such thing as coincidences - only connections between forces we do not yet have the understanding to perceive, Jack responds, and there’s a harder, more cutting edge to his tone, and 76 knows that inside, he and Jack are the same.

They have always been the same.

Because he hasn’t always been Strike-Commander Jack Morrison.

But Jack, un soldado de guerra -

That was what he had always been.

Always playing soldier.

There are only connections between forces we do not yet have the understanding to perceive.

And that, 76 finds, gets truer and truer every day.

And that leads to another possibility 76 hadn’t really wanted to consider because it just seemed too fucking stupid to be even considerable.

The possibility that none of this was a misdirection or even a misdirection misdirection.
That it was simply a fucking dangerous transport mission occurring through pockets of terrorist and gang organizations without any precautions or intelligence.

Gabriel had always had the ability to think several steps ahead of his enemies and his allies - it was that ability that had helped him bring down the Crisis, lead Overwatch for a decade, and lead Blackwatch for fifteen years - but his increasing paranoia later on in life had led him to see enemies in every shadow.

...*He wasn’t exactly wrong though*, the ghost of Jack whispers and 76 scowls.

That much, 76 and Jack agreed on.

If Gabe were here, he would’ve already seen the misdirection, the misdirection misdirection, the multiple groups the operation could be targeting, and reached the highly unlikely, nearly insane possibility that this was a set up in the worst conceivable way:

That someone, somewhere, wanted the bomb to be stolen.

Jack is silent, and together as one, the soldier sits quietly.

Thinking.

Feeling absurd for even considering it.

True, the inherent stupidity of a human mind probably actually accounts for what is really happening here - Hanlon’s razor and all that shit - but all the soldier can think is

This is a trap

And not for the three main terrorist possibilities.

This is a trap

And all the might of the U.S. military-industrial complex is going to walk right into it.

And if there’s any group 76 has literally negative faith in, it’s the U.S. military-industrial complex.

He supposes somewhere, his dead, ridiculous, conservative, alcoholic of a father is finally proud of him, but 76’s distrust of the U.S. military and its fuckbuddy the defense industry is born of a lifetime of mistreatment and abuses against him, the man he’d promised his love to, the organization he’d dedicated his life to, and the friends he’d sworn his services to.

The thoughts roll over and over in 76’s head, like the roiling of summer storm clouds and thunderheads before the rain, building and surging as their positive and negative charges begin to separate.

He might be an army of one

But even an army still exists in time and space

And he can’t just magically teleport himself to Dorado to solve this problem single-handedly, as much as he wishes he could.

76 sighs to himself as he pulls up the attached schedule of transportation. Even though he’s wearing a filtered mask, the whole thing still reeks of bullshit. He scans the timetable, and is alarmed to see that the bomb - real or fake - is shipping out soon, heading up through the central states of Mexico.
within a few days.

He can drive fast and try to make it to the border, but trying to stop it there will probably only help Talon.

However, 76 finds that he’s not terribly concerned about Talon - he suspects that if Talon had wanted to make a move, they would just attack the facility in Dorado rather than wait.

And LumériCo.

No, he can’t think about LumériCo. Not right now.

Same as Deadlock, he’ll think about “the source” later, but action is required immediately.

And speaking of Deadlock…

If they’re anything like the old Deadlock, they’ll make a move the moment they get wind of this transport. The route - because again, nothing is coincidence - travels directly through Deadlock Gorge and 76 is pretty sure he’s going to kill every motherfucker in the CIA for their sheer stupidity. Without Gabriel, Jesse, and Blackwatch to keep them in check, Deadlock was busy putting themselves back in power.

And what better way to cement your little fuckwad of an arms-dealing gang as a powerhouse than to steal a heavy-grade experimental fusion bomb?

He’s beginning to suspect that the incredibly unlikely, almost impossible conclusion that someone wants the bomb to be stolen

May in fact be the most correct.

He thinks that maybe, just maybe, the patterns behind the connections become a bit clearer.

*Gabriel.*

*If you were here*

*Would you see them too?*

The list runs down in his head: he’ll need better arms, more supplies, more biotic fields, some better Kevlar, a better ride, extra food, medical field equipment, jesus, the list goes on. He can get most of that here in Grand Mesa if he just goes to rummage around, but the ride and food - those will mean a pit stop in a town somewhere. Probably Cedaredge since it’s the closest, but he can’t really afford to slow down, not with this timetable. But he’ll be fast, so long as there are no major hang ups.

76 actually snaps a quick shot of the timetable with the screen glass of his visor - it’ll be easier to pull it up directly instead of whipping out the datapad every time he needed to check it - and rises from the chair. Lithely jumping over the admin dude’s body, he makes his way back out into the hallway, poking his head into a couple of different rooms - one is a server room, one is some sort of locker room, one is a -

Oh

Oh holy fuck

This one is some sort of tech development room - there are several tables with grenades and guns lying around in partially-assembled states. But there, right in the middle of the room
A fucking heavy pulse rifle.

Something inside him rises to the top of the stormclouds and oh, it should be a terrible thing that he feels so light and airy at the sight of a gun, but god, a part of his soul soars high and free as he saunters into the room. He draws up next to the table, and after a brief pause, he reaches out and hoists it up.

God, it fits so perfectly in his hands.

He knows.

He knows it was built for him.

Okay, maybe not this one in particular - this one is obviously newer, the design is a little more streamlined, a little more updated, the paint fresher (but the extra blue was a brilliant touch, he must say). But really, this rifle, this rifle -

Pulse rifles were fairly standard in Overwatch, but this heavy pulse rifle - this had been built for him. Built for Jack Morrison, the supersoldier, the man who could shoulder the kickback from the heavier plasma shots, the man who had been a part of this gun and this gun a part of him.

His heavy pulse rifle.

Ana had been sensible with a sniper rifle, Gabriel had been insane to go for dual shotguns, and Reinhardt had been fucking out of this world to pick a fucking rocket hammer, he’ll never understand the Crusaders - but this?

He had been at home with this.

They could try to change it, try to modify it, try to make it more...useable for a normal human being, but it wouldn’t work. He knows.

The heavy pulse rifle had been designed just for him.

Behind the visor

Jack smiles.

He’s going to fucking ruin Deadlock and the CIA’s day.

Add this to the list of “things that will help him destroy the world.”

And god,

He’s gonna feel fucking great while doing it.

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Bad company

I can’t deny

Bad company
'Til the day I die

Until the day I die.

Chapter End Notes

Song is "Bad Company" - Five Finger Death Punch cover (Youtube)

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Oh boy, real plot happened in this chapter!

Sorry for the delay on responding to comments this week, y'all. Been a busy one. Doesn't help that Blizzard dropped the Uprising event lol.
Overture: Eye in the Sky

Chapter Summary

A scientist and his friends watch the soldier. Meanwhile, a shadow watches them all.

Chapter Notes

Song is "Black Mambo" by Glass Animals (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overture: Eye in the Sky

What'll it be now, mister mole
Whispers sloth in curls of smoke
Take a back seat
Or play pharaoh?
Dance with me
And shake your bones

Slow down
It's a science
He's been waiting
To bring you down

Snake-eyed
With a sly smile
He can hold you
And shake you, child
Scientist: He’s not monkeying around

Monday, June 29, 2076; 12:02 pm - Watchpoint: Gibraltar, Gibraltar, Gibraltar

“Security alert incoming from Watchpoint: Grand Mesa.”

Winston pauses mid-sentence as a scowl of confusion covers his face. At the same time Athena says the alert, a small notification window appears in the corner of his second monitor screen, and he tilts his head in further confusion.

Not another one…

“Is something ze matter, Winston?”

He glances back to the main screen, where a look of concern passes over Angela’s face. It was time for their weekly chat, where they talked about their current work and their next plans, gave each other advice, and mainly just enjoyed each other’s company. Winston generally liked humanity as a whole, but he counted very few humans as close as troop members, Angela being chief among them.

“Sorry, Angela, Athena is sending me a notification - there’s another break-in at an American Watchpoint.”

Angela frowns, tapping a finger to her lips before asking, “Zhat...soldier character?”

“Yeah,” Winston grumbles, feeling the frustration rise a little in his chest. He knows he has no right to feel protective of Watchpoints these days, but he can’t help but perceive these break-ins as invasions of his old homes, the thefts as claiming his old property, and the senseless violence as a war against his old memories. Winston snorts, shaking his head in annoyance as he mutters, “Has he already gained international notoriety?”

“Not really,” Angela sighs, taking a sip from a steaming mug, “But Fareeha has mentioned him - apparently he and ze ‘ghost of Egypt’ are causing a lot of trouble for Helix.”

Winston purses his lips at that - even around the Mediterranean, where he, Angela, and Fareeha were situated, things were still touchy. Watchpoints in the area had been suffering from break-ins and invasions for years since the Petras Act was initiated, but the attacks in the United States were more recent.

“Sorry, Angela,” he heaves a great sigh, “I didn’t want to cut this short but I need to watch this -”

“May I watch too?”

Winston feels his face make an odd expression of surprise - he will never fully understand how humans can make so many unique facial expressions - but after mulling it over a bit, he shakes his head and replies, “I don’t see why not. Here, let me link you to the feed.”

He forwards the notification to Angela and then opens it, and she follows a second later.

He’s never prepared for these moments.

The notification opens up to a steep angle - security camera footage - in the corner of a dark, long hallway. There’s a tall, shadowed figure moving towards the camera at an angle, but their focus is
further down the hallway, past the camera’s range. It’s difficult to see, but the stance and the quick gleam of metal in the low-lighting makes it clear they’re hoisting a rifle to their shoulder. But that’s not the interesting...or rather upsetting part.

The upsetting part is the band of light radiating of of their face, right about at eye-level.

Winston and Angela watch quietly as the figure steadily pumps out bullets from the gun, moving back and forth from cover, chucking several grenades down the hall. Eventually, they stop firing, and sling the gun over their shoulder before sauntering down towards the end of the hallway.

“So...is zhat him?” Angela asks softly, contemplatively, and Winston nods, muttering, “Yup. Soldier: 76 is what the U.S. media is calling him.”

“Why is zhat?”

“He wears a jacket with 76 on the back in big numbers,” Winston explains, tapping to another camera angle. It cuts to the hallways they hadn’t been able to see, and they watch as he steps ungraciously over body after body of Helix security guards, the giant 76 barely visible in the lighting.

“And ze mask?” she nearly whispers, but Winston knows they both already know the answer. He sighs deeply, weary and aching and feeling resigned to failure.

“It’s my design,” Winston says, tabbing to another camera at the other end of the hall, “Though he has made some changes. I was in the process of designing better tactical gear for Blackwatch when the oversight committee declared suspension. My best guess is that he somehow found the design plans in one of the other Watchpoints and built his own.”

They watch as the soldier...bends down and drags one of the bodies along?

“What in ze world??” Angela stammers, leaning closer to her end of the screen. Winston frowns as much as a gorilla can, tabbing to another screen as they follow him into an adjacent room - the main computer room, Winston recognizes it instantly. He’s worked there tens, possibly hundreds of times.

The soldier hauls himself and the body he’s dragging along over to the chair, where he flops himself in it, and then - with the ease of someone who is familiar with this...bizarre process - yanks a glove off one of the body’s hands and presses it to a scanner.

“Oh...oh no,” Winston mutters as Angela covers her slackjawed mouth with her hands. The computer in Grand Mesa flares back into life, and the soldier -

There’s a dinging notification on Winston’s end.

He snaps his attention to it, and sees:

[Incoming video call from Fareeha Amari]

“Oh, uh...” he mutters, “Fareeha is contacting me. I’m going to put her on, okay?” Angela nods, still watching the security feed in horror. Winston opens the video call ping and -

“Winston, we have a problem,” Fareeha’s sharp, hawkish features immediately come into view next to Angela’s video call, and she’s looking more stressed than he’s ever seen her. He taps a few buttons on the callbox and suddenly, Fareeha blinks in shock a few times before saying, “Uh...hello, حبيبي (tn: my love).”
“Hello, dear,” Angela mutters with a tired, exhausted tone and Fareeha’s eyes move back and forth, obviously glancing between them on her screen.

“Am I interrupting something?”

“Nah, he already did that,” Winston says, sending her the security feed footage. Fareeha is busy for a second before she frowns with true, hardened anger, “Yes, I should have known you were one step ahead of me.”

“I take it Helix is in a panic?”

“Headquarters is furious,” Fareeha explains, though her dark, keen eyes never leave her second monitor, evidently focusing hard on watching the soldier. He has docked his datapad into some part of the computer and set the program to rip files, Winston knows - the soldier has done this at two other Watchpoints already.

And Helix has been unprepared every time.

“The nearest U.S. police are thirty minutes away,” Fareeha snaps and Winston and Angela watch as she fidgets uncomfortably, “But they will not be able to stop him. They do not have that kind of firepower.”

“Perhaps they can bring in the military to help?” Angela asks as helpfully as possible, but Fareeha just shakes her head, her dark hair swaying gently as she sighs, “No, see - those ARE the military. Mainly Helix guards, but U.S. military is mixed in there too. I can’t believe he’s going to get away with ANOTHER ONE.”

“Can you do something, Winston?” Angela glances at him. Winston is quiet for a moment before responding cautiously, “Athena may be able to do something - she still exists on Grand Mesa’s servers, which is how she got the alert for this in the first place.”

“Excellent,” Fareeha perks up almost immediately, “This is why I came to you - I knew you could -”

“Now, hang on, Fareeha.”

“...Oh, come ON, Winston, I could really use a break here,” she nearly moans with exasperation, and Winston is half reminded of the stubborn, emotional adolescent he had met when he’d first joined Overwatch. He just chuckles (but it sounds like a low rumble in his throat), “Fareeha, I’d love to help, and I’m sure Athena would too -”

“I would indeed, Winston,” Athena’s voice chimes in on the calls.

“But it is far too dangerous. We don’t know what other programs he has on that datapad, or if the Grand Mesa servers have protocols against an AI program like Athena. Above all else, we do not wish to alert either the soldier or the U.S. military that Athena is still present and active at old Watchpoints.”

Fareeha and Angela frown almost simultaneously, and Winston knows - without her ever having a corporeal form - that Athena is doing the same in some virtual space. Finally, Athena speaks up, “Very well. I shall continue to monitor his activities silently.”

“Can you see what he’s reading?” Winston asks her. The soldier has pulled up a series of messages, but from the camera’s distance he can’t make out the words.

“I will report back shortly,” the AI program says coolly before “leaving them” to do her work. The
three of them sit back in silence, watching as the soldier scrolls through the messages before he too leans back in his chair and just...sits.

“...He has to be ex-Overwatch, right?” Angela’s voice is so quiet, so low that Winston almost misses she’s actually said anything. Fareeha scowls, muttering, “That’s the hypothesis. That or ex-Blackwatch. He’s absolutely some sort of supersoldier.”

“...So he must have known Jack and Gabriel,” Angela concludes, still speaking with soft horror in her voice. Winston frowns at that, his lips pouting. It was hard enough to think that an ex-Overwatch agent could be doing this, but someone who was also a former colleague of the American commanders...

“Many nations had supersoldier programs. Some still do today,” Winston offers, ever the optimist. Both Angela and Fareeha make the same “Whatever you say” tired expression and Winston concedes, “Although the fact that he is very familiar with the American Watchpoints does suggest that he is, in fact, American... The commanders never talked about their program much.”

“Also that he hasn’t been caught,” Fareeha snorts, “I would find it very hard to believe that a German super-Crusader or Russian Siberian soldier would go unnoticed in the U.S. compared to an ex-SEP.”

Winston admits that’s a fair point.

“Is he connected to Talon?” Angela asks and Fareeha shakes her head, answering, “Helix doesn’t think so. We think he’s rogue, acting entirely on his own. It is troublesome that this keeps happening - in the U.S., in Egypt, elsewhere around the Mediterranean. And God only knows what’s happening with the Watchpoints in Russia, Mexico, and China.”

“Actually, Fareeha, I have some...interesting news about that,” Winston says thoughtfully, still keeping his eyes on the soldier on the screen. He tabs open another file and sends it to both of them, only looking at them when they’ve both opened it. Fareeha frowns reading the document, and Angela looks mildly confused.

Winston doesn’t blame them. It’s three separate maps of the Mediterranean and its surrounding countries - each maps shows a number of different Watchpoints, Blackbases, and just general U.N. facilities, along with dates when different ones were “hit,” how many people in the facilities were killed, and if anything else was taken.

“The first one,” Winston explains, “Shows what I suspect is a single individual - the ‘ghost of Egypt,’ as Helix has been calling them.” The places hit are clustered around in Egypt, parts of Israel and even a few in Libya, Jordan, and Lebanon. “This individual mainly breaks in, leaves a few injured or wounded - but never dead - steals what appears to be primarily medical supplies, and then leaves.”

“The dates on these can’t be right,” Fareeha mutters, her scowl deepening, “These start before the Petras Act is even initiated. Helix has only been aware of the Ghost of Egypt for the last several months.”

“It was difficult getting the data for all of this,” Winston admits, “Many of these places are not under U.N. or Helix jurisdiction, and many of them have destroyed or erased their Overwatch servers and databases. It was very troublesome getting Athena back on those systems. It’s also entirely possible that I’ve missed break-ins because of this.”

“What kind of medical supplies?” Angela asks, looking more involved now that they’ve entered her
territory of expertise. Winston looks at the list, muttering, “Lots of field medical equipment, mainly specialty stuff - biotic fluids, nanobot materials, nanoboost bullets, biotic grenades, sleep darts, bandages, antibiotics, the works. Athena’s analysis suggests that this individual may be selling or replicating the technology on the black market, or perhaps using it in covert operations or as an underground doctor.”

Angela gives Winston a very pointed look, but he makes a...scowling? Frowning? Sympathetic frowning? Yes that sounds right - he makes a sympathetic frowning expression back.

All three of them know exactly what it sounds like.

He can’t help that.

He can only report the data.

“Fareeha, I - ” Winston starts,” but Fareeha holds up a hand, shaking her head, “My mother trained many agents in her unique style of militarized medicine. It does not surprise me that one of them has decided to sell their services illegally. They could do much good if they worked for a hospital, or even for Helix, but if ex-Overwatch agents are breaking into Watchpoints and ex-Blackwatch agents are joining Talon, then my mother’s students are also capable of...this thievery.”

They sit in silence for a long moment, thinking of their own ghost, when Angela politely coughs a little, nodding at Winston.

“Oh, uh, right,” Winston clears this throat, “The second one is, I believe, Talon. You can see the wide area of hits - there is basically no Watchpoint or Blackbase in the region they have not broken into, and they leave many dead but take all sorts of stuff - medical equipment like the first individual, but also weapons, technology, data, intellectual property, even sometimes hauled off stuff like armor or clothes.”

“...Clothes?” Fareeha asks and Angela looks skeptical. Winston rolls his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug, “Apparently they’ll take pretty much anything.”

“And...this last one,” Angela says softly, looking at her version of the map. Fareeha’s lips draw into a tight, thin line and Winston sighs.

The third map - it features break-ins mainly across Southern Europe, starting in Italy and peppering its way through Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, Greece, Turkey - even dipping into Lebanon and Israel, overlapping with some of the Ghost’s territory.

“I’m...pretty certain this one is...the one we first saw about a year ago when I moved back into Gibraltar,” he responds calmly, and perhaps a little coldly:

“This one takes nothing physical, but will usually kill anywhere from 70 - 90% of the personnel in any given base. When they do steal something, it is usually information. In roughly one-third of all of their break-ins, no one is left alive.

“According to information on the Tor browser sites, mercenary forces and assassins are calling them...the Reaper.”

Angela shudders a little at the name, “So...cruel. Like ze Grim Reaper, yes?”

“That would be my guess,” Winston says dryly, “It is certainly a...fitting name, if not terribly clever.”

“And these dates...” Fareeha begins, to which Winston replies, “I only have dates that Athena
recorded from within the last year, but I found some older ones with a bit of digging and some...less than legal searches. The oldest I can find dates back to two months after the Petras Act is signed and Overwatch is officially decommissioned.”

“Are you telling me that this...monster,” Fareeha spits out the word like a bad taste, “Has been doing this for five years and this information has not been published? People need to know about this!”

“Believe me, I would send it to all sorts of news outlets if I wasn’t...you know, also doing something highly illegal,” Winston snorts, but Angela looks back and forth between both of them, murmuring, “Absolutely not.”

“...What?” Fareeha asks, cocking her head. The grim resolution on Angela’s face sets deeper into the wrinkles around her eyes and the nasolabial lines around her mouth and nose, and she shakes her head, “Zh is would incite mass panic.”

“There is someone or some thing out there mass-killing people at old Watchpoints and you’re worried about public perception?” Fareeha snaps, her eyes glinted with anger and righteousness, “Are you not the least bit concerned that it could be out looking for us?”

“About that,” Winston interrupts, and they both look at him, furious in their different demeanors, and he withers a little under their glares, “After that first incident, I managed to pull the names of all living ex-Overwatch and Blackwatch agents from all the Mediterranean databases. Only Athena here in Gibraltar has them now. I thought it wise to do this preemptively, though it almost put Athena at risk of alerting security a number of times -”

“WINSTON.”

Athena’s usually calm and cool voice interrupts them in a burst of panic and all three of them jump a little. Winston scrambles back to the video feed of the soldier - he’s leaning forward a bit now, fidgeting in his seat a little but there’s nothing odd -

“What’s wrong, Athena? Did he discover you?”

“No, Winston, it’s someone else.”

He’s never heard her in this much distress before.

Not since that day on the Moon -

When Harold’s head had been bashed against the -

Focus, Winston, he chides himself. Focus on the problem at hand.

“The military?” he asks and - and a near-lifetime of being around her has taught him to read all the emotions in her tones and words. He can detect small warbles in her voice, subtle shifts in the halting pace of the words, and it sounds

It sounds like she is shaking.

“No, no, no, NO, Winston - someone else. I do not know who. I was grabbing copies of the information the soldier was ripping when someone else entered the system and - I do not know WHO, just that they spoke to me and -”

“They spoke to you??” Winston asks, reeling in shock, “What did they - ?”
Athena snaps to a visual message and:

“¿Tú estás aquí también, Athena? Ah, todo está progresando más rápido de lo que pensaba.”

*Translation?* Winston asks, and Athena responds aloud, “You are here too, Athena? Ah, everything is progressing faster than I thought.”

Angela and Fareeha are looking at him with blatant fear and confusion written on their faces and he has to calm them down somehow but he’s never been good at being a “people person” and it’s not because he’s actually not a person but -

*Focus, Winston.*

He thinks it may be Harold’s voice, but the years have been so long that time and memory have withered it and warped it and melded it with other voices - Jack’s, Athena’s, Angela’s, his own…

*Focus, Winston.*

“Do you think that they tracked you here?” He asks decisively. His first concern is getting himself and Athena to safety, and to protect Angela and Fareeha from any possible accessory tracking.

“No, I...I do not think so,” Athena answers uncertainly, “They stayed there - they were more interested in seeing what the soldier was working on.”

He sees a two-fold issue:

1. Someone else - an unknown, Spanish-speaking individual - is following the vigilante through Watchpoint servers.
2. This same person knows of Athena and is familiar with her programming and operations.

He can attempt to reverse track the individual, but the amount of time and effort it would take - especially without knowing their goals and objectives - would be monumental and a huge risk to Athena and himself and the Gibraltar servers and -

“Winston.”

Angela’s voice, distant and insistent and -

“Winston, look - WINSTON.”

“Huh, what?” He snaps back to the present and -

The soldier has stood up.

All four of them hold their breath - three rather literally and one, uh, only virtually - and they watch as he stretches a little before taking a small hop over the administrative guard’s body and wandering back out into the hallway. Winston tabs back to the hallway camera and they sit quietly as he peeks into different rooms, one at a time.

“Athena,” Winston whispers, as if the soldier or the unknown presence lurking on the Grand Mesa computers could somehow hear him, “Athena, do you think you and the Gibraltar servers are safe?”

“From the other...individual?” she asks, also in a whisper. If the situation wasn’t so serious, Winston would probably get a low, rumbling chuckle about the whole thing - it was rare for him to show such
emotion, and even rarer for Athena to.  

“I believe we are fine for the time being, but I will begin setting up extra security measures,” she continues, still in a soft voice. The soldier lazily moves from one room to another. What is he even looking for?

“Put the files you pulled in quarantine,” Winston orders, trying to think about how to handle a possible security breach while also focusing on whatever the hell the vigilante was doing, “We’ll have to go through them individually.”

“The vast majority are word-processing files and email messages,” Athena explains, “There are only a few other unique programming files. It will not take us much time.”

“Good. Set up your additional securities and we’ll -” Winston stops.

Because the soldier has stopped.

He has flicked on a light in a room and come to a complete halt. Winston squints at the screen, adjusting his glasses, trying to see what he’s looking at. He tabs to the camera in the room the soldier has paused at and -

“Oh Allah,” Fareeha breathes out at the same time Angela whispers, “Mein Gott.” Winston does not have a deity to pray to, but he almost wishes he did.

Because there are a variety of large, powerful, dangerous weapons lying about the room.

A rock drops into the pit of Winston’s stomach and he feels a fearful vocalization rise upwards from the ripples it causes. He squashes down the vocalization and forces himself to watch as the soldier slowly walks up to the gun lying in the center table.

Winston knows that gun.

Everyone in the world knows that gun.

Jack Morrison’s weapon of choice.

The heavy pulse rifle.

The soldier reaches out a hand and stops, it almost seems like -

“No!” Angela says fiercely and Winston glances at her screen to see that she is glaring, tears glistening at her eyes and she mutters with a surprising amount of harsh protectiveness, “Zhat is JACK’S gun.”

“Well, not that one specifically -” Winston says dryly and Angela shoots him a burning stare, and he mumbles, “Sorry, I...sorry. I’m frustrated too, Angela.”

“He has no RIGHT to take zhat,” Angela whispers bitterly, “Even if zhat’s not ze actual gun, zhat is Jack’s gun. Zhat is a symbol of HIM, of Overwatch. And some...thief is just going to take it and do terrible, inhumane deeds with it.”

“It is a gun,” Fareeha murmurs, and Angela then glares at her, but the captain just shrugs her shoulders, “I understand better than most how we can get attached to personal weapons, but in the end, Angela, it is still just a gun. It will do terrible, inhumane deeds because that it what it is meant to do.”
“It was meant to protect, Fareeha. You should know that better than anyone.”

“I am rather shocked that you of all people, Angela, are defending this,” Fareeha says softly, almost...bittersweetly, “You hate violence.”

“I…” Angela pauses and Winston can see the gears turning in her head, “I do hate violence, Fareeha, but...but Jack was the one who taught me that sometimes, sometimes we need something to protect ourselves with. That as defenders of the people, we must be prepared to bloody our own hands to help those who cannot defend themselves.” Angela looks distant, a bit calmer at her own words, and Winston completes the concept with some familiar phrasing:

“Be it shield, gun, or stitches, we will help those who cannot help themselves. We can make a difference. We are hope. We are honor. We are courage. We are justice.”

“...We were all those things,” Angela sighs softly, “Once.”

Once.

Before the man who had said them all had died in an explosion.

Before he had grown distant and tired and expressionless.

Before he had lost the light in his eyes and the smile on his face.

Before, when he had been Jack.

The soldier picks up the gun.

They watch as he settles the gun against his shoulder with ease, how he shifts his hands into position, how much...more powerful he seems with it. And suddenly, without warning -

He takes it apart.

His hands move lightning-fast, sliding across the stock, undoing bolts and clips and pins so fast that Winston isn’t even sure what exactly happened, because there are suddenly parts of the pulse rifle on the table. The soldier inspects the different parts just as quickly, lifting them up and studying them briefly before moving onto the next part. Again, with shockingly fast hands, he reassembles the rifle in another few seconds, before looking the whole thing over again with a few curious head tilts.

“...What in the…” Fareeha mutters and Winston realizes the two of them are just as confused as he is. Finally, the soldier puts the gun back up against his shoulder and then -

He looks directly up at the camera in the corner of the room.

“Oh shit,” Winston swears - another thing he does extremely rarely because, really, there are only a select few situations that he thinks actually calls for it.

And this is one of them.

Fareeha is saying something heavy and fast in Arabic and Angela is gasping and Athena is trying to say something to Winston but he just watches in shock as the soldier squares himself up to the camera, lifts one hand off the gun -

He flips them off.

Then he raises the heavy pulse rifle at the camera and fires.
The screen goes black.

Winston immediately tabs to another camera, the one back out in the hallway, and they see the video feed light up just in time for the soldier to step out into the hallway, and shoot that camera too.

“He waited this whole time to just shoot the cameras at the end??” Fareeha is yelling to no one in particular and Angela is snapping something in German to no one in particular and Winston is tabbing back to the camera in the computer room and they watch in steadily increasing chaotic, incoherent noises as the soldier steps back into that room too and punches out the camera with another pulse shot.

He tabs around to other views but everything else is of empty rooms or knocked out soldiers and guards on the ground.

“Dammit,” Winston swears again, snorting a little in anger, “We’ve lost him.”

“I -” Athena mumbles which again, he’s surprised to hear such affect in her voice, “I can go back in -”

“Nonsense,” Winston says bluntly and Angela nods along, saying, “We cannot risk you, Athena. If the other...person is still there, then we cannot take that chance.”

“Our best guess will be to look through the files that he’s taken and see if we can discern some sort of pattern,” Fareeha says, calming down, but Winston thinks he can still see her fuming, “And Helix will have something to say, I’m certain. Still...I cannot believe he was toying with us the whole time.”

“He probably did not know it was us,” Winston clarifies, “He must have thought it was Helix or the U.S. military watching him, since those cameras are always recording.”

“Still, the fact that he did not destroy them immediately means that he does not care about being recorded,” Fareeha grumbles, frumping back into her seat, arms folded in frustration. Angela looks thoughtful, saying, “Perhaps he wants to be recorded?”

“But for what purpose?” Fareeha asks confusedly, “What could he possibly achieve by people knowing that he’s taken information and a heavy pulse rifle?”

“Are his patterns similar to any of the others?” Angela asks, looking at Winston.

“Athena?”

“Compiling information... Ready.”

A map of the United States pops up on Winston’s screen - similar to the others, it shows locations of break-ins reported to have been done by the man known as Soldier: 76, along with a bunch of readouts about what he’s taken. Winston forwards the information to Angela and Fareeha and all three of them sit for a moment when -

“...No casualties?” Fareeha asks in shock, “Impossible. We saw him throw grenades at people.”

“Knock out grenades, perhaps,” Angela murmurs, “Sonic grenades, flash grenades, pressure grenades - zhere are many kinds, ze majority nonlethal.”

“And the bullets? From the civilian rifle?” Fareeha questions, again shaking her head in disbelief.
“If he aims for limbs, zhat could incapacitate the guards, causing them to drop zheir weapons, and leaving them vulnerable to ze grenades,” Angela surmises, “It is a common technique when people are practicing nonlethal tactics - many of Overwatch’s forces were trained in it. And - assuming he leaves soon - ze guards will be waking up and will be able to apply emergency dressings until more help arrives.”

“It appears he’s taken primarily information and supplies from the Watchpoints, and only information from banks and financial institutions,” Winston says, scowling in thought, “But why would he want financial information?”

“If we are presuming that his motives are related to Overwatch in some way,” Athena says calmly, “Then it is possible that he has targeted these places due to their financial contributions to the United Nations during Overwatch’s active era.”

All three of the living individuals look at each other in confusion, and Winston responds, “Explain, Athena.”

“Gladly. Many of these institutions suffered in the American recessions of the early 20’s, and were hit hard with panic as a full economic depression affected the country during the Omnic Crisis. As such, their committees and shareholders were extremely grateful when Overwatch stepped in to stop the Detroit and Seattle Omniums. Many contributed philanthropic funding to the United Nations when Overwatch transitioned into its peacekeeping phase. Support for the United Nations and Overwatch began to slow about five to six years ago, which is when many political analysts say the decline of Overwatch began.”

The three of them contemplate her words, before Angela says softly, “Five years ago is when Jesse left Overwatch.”

“Five years ago is when my mother…” Fareeha begins, but can’t really finish the sentence. But they all know. Things had never quite been the same in Overwatch after Ana had…

Arguably, things had begun to spiral downward even a bit earlier than that.

When Gerárd had been assassinated and Amélie had disappeared.

“Is the lack of support correlated with the decline of Overwatch?” Winston asks, “Publically, information about Blackwatch and crucial mission failures did not begin until 2070.”

“It is impossible to say without further data.” Athena admits, “But from the framework of assessing Soldier: 76, it seems possible that he would consider them correlated or even more directly connected, though I do not have access to the information he has stolen.”

“We will have to assess those files from Grand Mesa closely,” Winston thinks aloud, “He hasn’t hurt anyone yet but it’s probably only a matter of time before he does something even more drastic. And now that he has a heavy pulse rifle, his shots will certainly be...more lethal.”

“He can set ze gun to low-level energy bursts,” Angela says, “Zhey’ll sting a lot - probably burn quite a bit, but may have a similar effect to knock out grenades - enough blast to concuss but not kill.”

“Even so, that’s not a risk we can take,” Winston replies.

“When you figure out what he’s looking for in those files, Winston, I’d really appreciate if you could call me - ” Fareeha begins, but stops, looking confused at something off of her screen, “Apologies, I must take this call. I will be back shortly.” Her window blips closed and Winston and Angela are
left looking at each other, feeling more tired and drained by the second.

A vigilante targeting Overwatch and stealing its heavy weapons.

A hacker of some sort tracking him and monitoring Athena.

The ever-looming threat of the...thing known as Reaper.

The constant fear that Talon could attack him any day.

The concern that a Second Omnic Crisis would break out in Russia at any point.

The anxiety that more and more of his friends and old comrades were dying in ditches around the world -

*Focus, Winston.*

He breathes deeply, letting the air fill his lungs and remind him of the value of life.

Making a difference starts with a plan.

Making a plan starts with a level head.

Having a level head requires focus.

First and foremost is tightening their digital and virtual securities, ensuring that Athena, himself, and the Gibraltar databases are safe. Second will be looking through the Grand Mesa files, searching for a pattern to the Soldier’s behavior and perhaps searching for new answers to old questions:

Had there been a conspiracy within Overwatch to bring it down?

What was the U.S. military doing with all the old Watchpoints?

Why did a possible ex-Overwatch agent want to target them so badly?

And why did he feel like something was missing?

Something crucial…

“Winston,” Angela says quietly, breaking the silence between them, “I...I think zhat... Zhere’s something I should say -”

There’s another pinging noise and Winston looks at the notification, muttering, “Hang on, Angela, Fareeha’s back.” He opens the message and connects her to Angela as well, but when Fareeha’s face appears -

She looks distraught.

“Fareeha!” Angela says sharply as Winston frowns, “What’s wrong, Liebe? Is everything alright?”

“I…” Fareeha starts, and stops. She shuts her eyes in pain, but Winston has learned to tell that she is not physically hurt - only emotionally upset, and when she opens them again, he sees a look of miserable defeat and resignation on her face:

“My squad is being sent to Dorado, Mexico in a day. We are going to provide extra security for a classified cargo transport mission through Mexico and into the United States.”
She looks at them, dark eyes filled with a hard, deep resolution:

“Our destination is Watchpoint: Grand Mesa.”

Angela puts a hand to her open mouth and Winston mutters incredulously, “Whatever’s on that cargo - ”

“The Soldier must know about it,” Fareeha finishes, looking grim, “I suspect I will be seeing him much sooner than I ever thought I would.”

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[Un semáforo es una variable especial (o tipo abstracto de datos) que constituye el método clásico para restringir o permitir el acceso a recursos compartidos (por ejemplo, un recurso de almacenamiento del sistema o variables del código fuente) en un entorno de multiprocesamiento (en el que se ejecutarán varios procesos concurrentemente).]

[In computer science, a semaphore is a variable or abstract data type used to control access to a common resource by multiple processes in a concurrent system such as a multiprogramming operating system. A trivial semaphore is a plain variable that is changed (for example, incremented or decremented, or toggled) depending on programmer-defined conditions. The variable is then used as a condition to control access to some system resource.]

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Semáforo: Didn’t see that coming

Monday, June 29, 2076: 5:03 am - Dorado, Mexico

She’s semi-dozing to the glow of the livestream when the alert blinks directly into her brain.

It’s pretty much impossible to describe the actual sensation of being mentally connected to the web and a thousand different online systems, but if Sombra had to describe it, she would say that it’s a lot like thoughts or memories surfacing unbidden into consciousness - blurbs or phrases or words that never quite leave the mental stratosphere of the self, like a song you can’t forget or a commercial you desperately wish you could.

At times, it can be a sensation quite beautiful.

But more often than not it was just kinda annoying.

Sombra flutters her eyes sleepily a few times, before rubbing a hand to her stiff forehead and cheeks. Slowly, as if they didn’t really want to move, her eyes drift away from the D.Va stream down to the clock in the corner of the monitor and a frown forms from her confusion.

It cannot be five in the morning, qué chingados. (tn: what the fuck)

Sombra isn’t terribly surprised, de verdad. She has a tragic sleep schedule of “no sleep schedule,”
but staying up until five in the morning is rather unusual for her. She tends to crawl into bed in her apartment or a large, comfy chair in the Los Muertos base sometime between midnight and three in the morning. So five is a deviation from the norm, but not hugely, and it happens often enough that no one - not even herself - is surprised.

She brushes some hair out of her face and, yawning widely, opens up her own personal monitoring program. It had taken her years to perfect it, and even now she continued to tweak the code and fix up holes in the system as technology updated (but let’s not fool ourselves - it was already the most advance program in the world, arguably second only to the coding that had invented the Omnics), but her hard work, patience, and sleepless nights had paid off - she had snuck it onto numerous systems the world over.

And no one knew she had done it.

Truly, a work of art.

Hypothetically, she could just do all of this in her head, using her biosystem and “handboard” as she called it, but she’s far too sleepy to attempt to do it right now. Using the biosystem extensively to directly tap into some distant system drained her like nothing else, and she didn’t really want to pass out at five in the morning from trying to watch some cabrón break into a Watchpoint.

Although that wasn’t exactly the best description of him, actually. Honest, probably, but not entirely accurate.

Then again, it’s pretty much impossible to accurately describe Jack Morrison.

The system on her computer searches for a brief second, and then pulls up a video monitoring feed, the CIA’s messaging system, the Grand Mesa databases and files, and a number of engineering programs the old Watchpoint servers host. She taps through the video feed until she finds him - he’s gunning down some Helix security in some sort of hallway - and then flips back to the databases and files. There’s nothing unique in terms of the actual file types - they’re almost all word processing documents and spreadsheets and engineering files - but there are a number of shoddily-protected classified pieces that Sombra eyes with a little more interesting.

Hmm, el soldado necesitará ayuda con estos. (tn: the soldier will need help with these)

It may be impossible to accurately describe Jack Morrison, but “technologically advanced” is absolutely not accurate.

Sombra runs her password breaker on the pieces, glancing back at the stream briefly - D.Va could very well get a new high score here - and then glancing back to the soldier. He’s throwing grenades now, so Sombra knows she has a minute or two.

Fortunately for him, her password breaker is also the best in the world.

It unlocks the pieces in record time and Sombra scoffs sleepily at the CIA. The agency could terrorize the world, but its virtual securities were laughable. Her eyes lazily drift over the classified contents, mainly weapons development, but they stop over a…

A timetable for a train.

A train departing from Dorado.

Ah, la bomba está lista. (tn: the bomb is ready)
Sombra had known that, of course. She had been monitoring the bomb’s development for the last several months. She hadn’t intervened in LumériCo’s progress because, well, she wasn’t fucking suicidal. Attempting to destroy the bomb in the middle of their facilities would be possible for her, but she would probably get riddled with bullets in the process.

And the idea was super not appealing.

She glances again at the video feed of the soldier. He’s finishing up now, stepping over the first few guards unconscious on the floor.

No, the idea of destroying the bomb in the middle of LumériCo or even in the middle of Dorado is really not appealing.

But the idea of the soldier destroying the bomb, somewhere far, far away from her home?

*Ahora que está muy atractivo.* (tn: now that is very attractive)

She finds the original CIA messages, which had hastily been locked up under the classified files by some poor, anxious asshole in Grand Mesa, and restores them to their original messenger.

Right where she knows the soldier will find them.

Sombra sits back, looking at the D.Va stream. Hana is close now, very close to beating the world record in this puzzle game. Sombra doesn’t care much about the game - she generally prefers when D.Va plays strategy or fighting games due to how much more entertaining those are - but D.Va is an excellent livestreamer, super involved with her fans, constantly cracking jokes and telling stories about her military and meka shenanigans.

Her eyes flick back to the soldier - he’s dragging some man along to the computer, and Sombra sighs, fighting off sleep. Just a few more minutes - both the soldier and D.Va won’t take much longer now. She’ll probably have to sleep all day, but if she can ensure that he finds the messages about the bombs, she can take the day off.

She already knows she’s leaving to follow the train when it departs.

Man, her nonexistent sleep schedule is gonna get *fucked up.*

D.Va is working her way through the puzzle - pieces are flying faster and faster to the point where Sombra’s tired eyes are struggling to keep up - when something else pings directly into her brain.

Sombra frowns a bit. Because the message doesn’t make much sense.

Someone else is watching the soldier.

Sombra twists back towards the smaller screen where the Grand Mesa databases and files are sitting. She digs a little deeper and pulls up the entire system.

It’s definitely risky, but since everyone in the base is passed out except for a technologically-challenged old soldier, Sombra figures there’s not really much of a problem. And when it comes to computers, there are not many in the world who can best her. She searches through the files, the coding, the different programs, but she can’t exactly find where this other individual is lurking, or what they’re doing exactly.

She frowns, her lips making a small pout as her eyebrows scrunch down. The soldier has seated himself at the computer and managed to unlock it with the administrator’s handprint, docking his
datapad into the tower. She can see that he’s starting to rip files off, which is a good start.

But the alert about the other individual won’t go away.

Sombra sighs.

Guess she won’t be seeing the end of D.Va’s stream.

Her biopanels flare to bright, purple life.

She shuts her eyes.

It’s pretty much impossible to accurately describe what entering the connectivity between her mind and the rest of the world is like, but Sombra...Sombra thinks it’s rather like the drop into a cenote, the water and rock and overgrown greenery engulfing the person as the sky falls away and the world rushes up to embrace them. The light shifts from sunlight and raw clouds into a blue, shimmering glow that is water and crumbling limestone, filled with dust motes and the drip-drip of glittering rainfall, and the self falls into a stream of water that ribbons through the earth like a vein through the body, and that

That is much like falling into the connectivity in her mind.

She drifts back, her biosystem pulling up the Grand Mesa system inside her. In physicality, her hands are tapping at the “handpad,” lighting up purple buttons and shifting as her fingers swipe her mind through the different system trees. The pinging alert is coming from deep within the system, and she follows the river of information down, deeper and deeper into the earth of computer. She’s entered the old, “hidden” Overwatch systems - they’re deep, covered up by U.S. military and CIA systems and even some Helix stuff, but they lay there, at the core of the system, largely untouched even though it’s been years since the agency even technically existed.

“Technically” being the operative word.

Because once she encounters the presence, she knows exactly who it is.

A ghost.

A figure who isn’t supposed to exist.

A being who was supposed to be decommissioned along with Overwatch.

Sombra pauses, the stream of coding entering her mind as lights and sounds, as words and phrases, as memories and songs surfacing unbidden, and she watches with mild interest as the “intrusion” hovers among them, picking away at the coding and words, despite being coding and words and small motes of light and dust “herself.”

Sombra cocks her head to the side, smiling a little before she finally asks - both aloud and “written”:

“You are here too, Athena? Ah, things are progressing much faster than I thought.”

Athena jolts a little, her strings of words and codes jumping at the verbiage, flashing bright before she disappears, rushing up the stream of words and water back to the surface and out to somewhere else.

Probably Gibraltar.

Ha. Like she doesn’t know what that gorilla is up to. She’s been monitoring him since he moved
back into the Watchpoint.

Hmm, she hadn’t meant to scare Athena off...but perhaps alerting Winston of her presence wasn’t entirely a bad thing.

Much like feeding the soldier bits of information...giving him the breadcrumbs.

Leading him directly to the place she needs him to be.

*Una pieza a la vez.* (tn: one piece at a time)

She smirks to herself.

*Paciencia, muchacha.* Hard work and patience had always paid off for her.

She surfaces quickly, maneuvering her way back out of the system and popping back into physicality. She blinks her real eyes a few times, readjusting to actually seeing things and not just mentally visualizing them. She sighs, flitting them to D.Va’s stream, where Hana and her followers are celebrating her new high score, fake confetti raining down on the screen as Hana does a small, aggressive dance. She glances back to the soldier, who has stood up stretching a little. She can see from the other panels that he’s read the messages between the CIA agent in Dorado and the general in Grand Mesa, that he’s aware of the bomb, that he knows the transport schedule.

And that, even though it’s impossible to accurately describe Jack Morrison

She knows he will come to stop it.

Sombra smiles sleepily, feeling drained but satisfied. She opens up her own messaging system and writes quickly:

---

To: Terry.Hernandez

From: Los.Muertos

Subject: Found something for you ;)

Hey Terry,

Found this on the Watchpoint Grand Mesa files. Thought it might interest you. Los Muertos is busy with other stuff at the moment, and we’re not interested in nabbing this so close to LumériCo, so I decided to pass it on to Deadlock.

*Hasta luego,*

Sombra
She attaches the messaging chain from the CIA agent and sends it off.

One piece at a time, the puzzle completes itself.

She grins lazily, and then pushes herself towards her bedroom.

She has to plan for her train ride to the U.S.

But first, time for some much needed sleep.

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[Even if all processes follow these rules, multi-resource deadlock may still occur when there are different resources managed by different semaphores and when processes need to use more than one resource at a time.]

[In concurrent computing, a deadlock is a state in which each member of a group of actions, is waiting for some other member to release a lock. In an operating system, a deadlock occurs when a process or thread enters a waiting state because a requested system resource is held by another waiting process, which in turn is waiting for another resource held by another waiting process. In a communications system, deadlocks occur mainly due to lost or corrupt signals rather than resource contention.]

--------

Tickle that cheek

And take your throne

Pump your veins

With gushing gold

Slow down

It's a science

He's been waiting

To bring you down

Snake-eyed
With a sly smile
He can hold you
And shake you, child

We can hold you
We can hold you
We can hold you
We can hold you

Chapter End Notes

Things are starting to move, huh?
Though I suspect they might get deadlocked.

*BA-DUM-tssssh*
Segador y Soldado: Mo' Money, Mo' Problems

Chapter Summary

A soldier has some money problems.

A reaper discovers that things he believed to be dead and gone are back with a vengeance.

Chapter Notes

Warning: severely angry rant at the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soldado y Segador: Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems

A company

Always on the run.

A destiny

Oh, it’s the rising sun.

I was born

A shotgun in my hands.

Behind the gun,

I’ll make my final stand.

And that’s why they call me -

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Soldado: Credit Problems

Monday, June 29, 2076: 6:38 am - Colorado, United States
“Hey there, welcome to the Tri-R Motel. Are you here for a reservation?”

The receptionist is a short, middle aged woman with a cheerful smile and a handful of wrinkles around her eyes. 76 gives her a patented Morrison grin, broad and wide and welcoming. He wasn’t a total tool - he had ditched the visor and jacket upon leaving Grand Mesa’s premises, opting for a bike helmet and less obvious leather jacket. He had stuffed everything into his bag - including the heavy pulse rifle (which was not nearly as conspicuous as it sounded due to being surrounded by lumps of clothes) - and casually strolled to where he had parked the beat up motorcycle down the road from the Watchpoint’s entrance, out of sight of security cameras. It had been a winding but easy drive down the mesa into the nearby town of Cedaredge, where he figured he’d lay low for 24-36 hours before heading south to Santa Fe.

*Probably gonna need a better bike,* he thinks as he slides up to the reception desk. The current one was doing fine but it had already been ten years old when he’d bought it two years ago - also already heavily traveled and at this point badly inefficient in terms of battery life. And combo charger-gas stations were few and far between out here. He’d only added to the mileage driving it up and down the country in a haphazard manner.

But first

Keep his head down

Look for signs of the area being swept

Head out when the coast was clear.

It wouldn’t take him long to reach Santa Fe - a day’s drive at most, and from there it was only an hour of winding backroads to Deadlock Gorge. The train was scheduled to pass through in a few days, since it was making frequent stops to rotate out guards.

*What a fucking shitshow.*

If Gabriel were around, he’d be throwing a fit over how badly organized this transport mission was. 76 smiles distantly at the thought and then turns his attention to the receptionist, oozing charm.

“’Fraid not, sweetheart,” he says with a casual, lazy grin and he’s pleased to see her smile back, a faint blush dusting her cheeks. Years of being Strike-Commander had aged him roughly, but even time, stress, and a fucking explosion couldn’t stamp down his personality.

His steel-hearted, cunning, enchanting personality.

“Sorry, I should’ve called at my last pit stop but I was anxious to get back on the road,” he sighs. She smiles even more brightly, offering, “Not a problem, dear. We get roadtrippers all the time. How many nights will you be staying?”

“Better put me down for two, maybe three,” he says, thinking about how long it’s gonna take him to get food and either clean up the current bike or grab a new one, “I wanna see Grand Mesa and I’ll probably have to get the bike fixed up a little. Got any places you recommend?”

“Hmm, Dad’s Auto down the road from us does good work - they patch up lots of passersby when they come through town,” she replies, clicking through something on her computer, “Or there’s Lucky Auto a little ways in town, but they charge a little more. Generally considered the best round here, though. How bout I just put you down for two, and if you need the third night we’ll talk?”
“Sounds lovely,” 76 smiles again, “But let’s just charge me for one night, yeah?”

“Now, now, you’re the one that said two,” she chuckles as he pulls out his wallet. He sighs fakely, muttering, “Michelle, please, I’m gonna be out quite a bit on fixin’ up the bike. Surely we can reach an agreement?”

“Tell you what, I’ll give you a referral to Dad’s and that’ll bring down the cost a bit, does that work for you?” the receptionist - Michelle, as her nametag says - laughs a little and he grins that roguish smirk again, “You’re too kind. Does credit work?”

“Oooh, sorry, dear, we’re strictly a cash business,” she jokes back and he rummages through his pockets for -

“I have a twenty, uh...thirty-cents and a stick of gum,” he offers unhelpfully and she laughs at that one.

“For you, dear, I’ll make an exception,” Michelle smiles and he hands her the card. She glances at it before asking, “So what brings you out here, Jim?”

He could strangle Gabriel for the fake name, but god damn, if the false civilian identities hadn’t been a fucking genius idea.

“Well, you know, I wanna see Grand Mesa - the parts I can anyways, I know the military has the base closed off, but some of the trails are still good. Then I’m gonna head out to see Albuquerque and onto the Grand Canyon.” The lie comes easy to him.

So many of them do.

“What prompted you to head this way?” she asks as she punches the information into the computer. Michelle shrugs a little, explaining, “More or less. Used to be a bigger deal to come see Grand Mesa back when Overwatch was around - they brought in a lot more tourism around these parts than...whoever they got up there now. Not surprising really - local legends say that you could find Jack Morrison in the Grand Mesa Diner not too far up the road here on a good weekend.”

*That one’s actually true,* 76 thinks dryly. He liked their eggs and hash and they made some killer country-fried steak. Even Gabriel had liked it, which was difficult for southern food to do.

Fuck, maybe he’ll go get one of those for dinner.

“What prompted you to head this way?” she asks, sliding back the card, “Most people just skip Grand Mesa and head straight to Mesa Verde or the Grand Canyon, especially now that Overwatch is gone.”

He shrugs casually, “I know it’s pretty much written on my face, but I’m a vet.”

Her eyes flicker to the long, snarled scars crossing his face and then back to his eyes. He just smiles coyly, “Hard to believe, but I used to be a lot prettier.”

“I’m sure you were, you heartbreaker,” she snorts, typing something else in.

“Oh boy, we don’t even want to go there,” he chuckles, and stubbornly refuses to admit that it stings his heart a little - Gabriel’s angry face contorting into his mind - before adding, “Well, I’ve always wanted to see some of the old Watchpoints. Mean a lot to me and some of my old, uh, war buddies. The Crisis still lives in all of us.”
Also not a lie.

That one has never been a lie.

Michelle nods sympathetically, replying, “My...my brother is a Crisis vet too. I get it.”

“Yeah…” 76 says softly, dreamily, as if he’s thinking long and far but really he’s thinking about country-fried steak, “Been hard, ya know? Finally figured it was time for retirement - get out and see all the places I’ve always wanted to see, see the things that...made a difference in the world.”

That one was a lie.

Like he was ever going to retire.

What was the song?

Bad company, until the day I die?

Or something like that.

“Well, I hope you get to see it all,” she replies gently, writing something onto a paper slip and sliding it and a key card to him, “The world is a big place after all. I’ve given you room 152 - just head back out the doors and swing a left and it’ll be a few doors down. Oh and also!” She grabs another slip of paper off her desk and signs it real fast before handing it to him - it’s a discount flyer for Dad’s Auto (“just like how pop used to work”) with a little handwritten note saying, “Got you another one, Sam.”

“Guess I’m just another tourist catch, huh?” 76 chuckles and she giggles a little, “Sam and I have a solid business relationship, don’t pay it no mind.”

“Oh ho, is that what they call it around here?”

“Oh stop it, Jim. Go on, go get settled in.” She practically shoos him out the door, blushing faintly and he gives her a cheeky wink before grabbing his bag and heading out the door. He finds 152 exactly where she said, swipes the keycard, and pushes himself in.

It smells slightly cold and musty, like the room hasn’t been lived in much and the air is a little too filtered, but he doesn’t care about that. He gingerly sets the bag on the bed before seating himself beside it, tired and bone-weary. At some point his boots get roughly taken off, along with the leather jacket, and he half-pushes, half-crawls his way along the bed until his head falls against the extra fluffy pillows.

A heavy sigh escapes his lips, but he forces his eyes to stay open.

With a reluctant tug, he pops his datapad out of his sidebag and unlocks it, blinking a little against the brightness.

Routine first, and then homework.

He opens up Atlas News in one tab, the New York Times in another, Washington Post in a third, Al Jazeera in a fourth and his civilian bank account in a fifth. While the first four are loading, he unlocks his bank account and -

Something is wrong.

Something is very wrong.
There - nestled between the “payment pending for Tri-R Motel” and the “electric/gas charge” from his last pit stop

Is a deposit for nearly 6000 Euro credits.

What the actual fuck.

Almost with a bemused, exhausted numbness settling over him, 76 taps the entry and it pops up with a few more details. It’s a payment being made from an account under the name of “Andy Lee,” for reasons unknown, from a location unknown, with an account ID number as a garbled mix of numbers.

It’s the fakest fucking thing 76 has ever seen.

And it terrifies him.

Because of everything that he’s seen in the last few hours - a fucking heavy fusion bomb being transported by train through Mexico and the southwestern United States, Portero being corrupt as all hell, Deadlock being back, finding a perfect heavy pulse rifle in his favorite color - this is the one that actually, truly throws him for an unexpected loop.

This was a breach in his personal securities.

And there were literally zero explanations for why.

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Segador: Clean Up

Tuesday, June 30, 2076: (13:52 hrs) 1:52 p.m. - Zaragoza, Spain

Experimental Weapon Stolen From Watchpoint: Grand Mesa

Officials confirm connections to earlier incidents.

GRAND JUNCTION, CO—A masked intruder has attacked a former Overwatch facility, injuring a number of private security guards and stealing military equipment.

According to United States government spokesperson Marc Guerra, the incident occurred around 4 a.m. local time on Monday at Watchpoint: Grand Mesa, a remote facility in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Helix Security International personnel who were stationed at the former Overwatch base engaged in a firefight with the attacker, but they failed to apprehend him.

One of the guards, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed that the assailant possessed speed and strength beyond anything "a normal person" should be capable of. "He was a professional," the guard also said. "Confident. Surgical. Had all the hallmarks of someone with advanced military training." ---

--- Reaper drops himself heavily onto the bench in front of Widowmaker and through his (rather limited) peripheral vision he sees her jump a little.
Fucking worth it.

The startled expression on her face morphs into a deep scowl as he scrolls lazily through the rest of
the article (he’s already read it, he’s just pretending to read it again to act like a fucking douchebag),
until a long, thin finger reaches up over the top of the datapad and pushes it down from his view. He
tilts his head up towards her in a questioning lean and she snarls, “What are you doing?”

“You are drawing unnecessary attention over ‘ere,” she hisses, eyes flashing dangerously. They’re
sitting in a corner of a long bench table in the mess hall, and for what might really be the first time,
Reaper can see that Talon is actually composed of real people and not Stormtrooper knock-offs like
he thought they were. A number of agents a little ways down the table are eyeing the two of them
but rapidly avert their gaze when Widowmaker shoots them a sniping glare. He shrugs casually,
muttering, “Mocosa, that outfit draws all sorts of unnecessary attention all on its own - ”

“I - it’s - What?” she snaps in confusion and he almost chuckles aloud, growling out, “Let me guess,
its some sort of ‘skin tight armor’ or something?”

Of course it is, mon cherry or whatever it is you French people say, because that V-neck leaves
your heart and lungs completely exposed for a counter-sniper.” He leans back a little, just barely
keeping his balance on the bench as he spreads his arms and makes a “gimme, gimme” gesture,
saying, “C’mon, araña, let me make you something way better to wear.”

She stares at him like he’s lost his damn mind, which, to her credit, he probably has.

“Are you truly doing this right now?” Widowmaker asks in authentic bewilderment and beneath the
mask he grins, “I’ll give you real armor.” As if that will sweeten the deal.

“We leave for a mission in three ‘ours.”

…¿Qué?

Reaper snaps back over to his datapad, and taps around until he finds the internal messaging
application and, sure enough, there’s a notification.

“Oh fuck, already?” he breathes, opening it and Widowmaker sniffs haughtily, “Part of it is transport
- we have to fly out to the ‘orrible United States. Although I suppose that will make you ‘appy?”

“Unless it’s in the greatest city in the world or the second greatest city called Disneyland, I don’t care
-” Reaper begins but stops to a dead halt when he sees the message.

Because no.

Esta no puede ser la verdad. (Tn: this cannot be the truth)

He cannot

He cannot be helping Deadlock for his first official Talon mission.

THEY DON’T EVEN FUCKING EXIST ANYMORE WHAT THE FUCK -
It’s been 24 hours and 76 knows something is happening.

The money continues to enter the account, only instead of Andy Lee, the different payments are under other, incredibly fake names - Richie Smith, Larry Gonzalez, Samuel Thompson, etc. 76 is convinced they’re all coming from the same “person” or account - extremely high payments, nearly identical amounts, roughly every few hours. The grand total is close to 35,000 Euro credits.

If 76 didn’t know better, it almost looks like…

These are paychecks, he thinks over breakfast at the Grand Mesa Diner in Cedaredge, scrolling through them. Someone is getting paid through a randomizer account and that is getting forwarded here - probably after passing through multiple dummy accounts first.

76 just can’t figure out why though.

He stares at the screen long and hard, feeling extremely uneasy. He feels like it’s a trap somehow, but he’s not entirely sure how or why. Had the US government linked the fake ID to the mysterious vigilante? Were they trying to lure out Jack Morrison? Surely they knew by now his death records were fake. Someone somewhere knew.

They probably kept the file for the fake ID, even though I demanded the highest level of confidentiality on the issue, he decides. He wouldn’t put it past the assholes, because even the most classified information gets disclosed to someone somewhere.

But then why deposit money into the account?

And through an anonymized payment source at that?

76 can’t help but feel like he’s staring at the messages between the CIA asshole and the General asshole again, trying to piece together the different angles and routes it could go. They must be tracking his card or something. He doesn’t know how feeding him money helps in that, but it has to do something.

It’s gotta be hot or something, he thinks, shoveling more egg into his mouth, It’s time to ditch the card, unfortunately.

If I’m fast, I can pull a bunch of cash and be good for awhile.

He doesn’t know what he’s gonna do when whatever cash he pulls runs out though, unless…

I can try calling the card company, get a new one sent home.

But heading back home would take tremendous effort, and the place is more than likely being watched at this point.
Also, he would give anything

And everything

To never see that empty house ever again.

The dark woven cotton stuffed into his thigh pocket presses back against him like the grip of a dark, inquisitive hand -

*Stop*, he insists to him. *Not here. Not now.*

He pauses eating, sighing to himself. He can’t figure it out, can’t understand it - he’s usually so good with money, with understanding where it’s coming from, where it’s going, all the strings attached to it. That sense had made him a great peacetime Strike-Commander, and Gabriel had always said that he was so much better at budgeting. And Jack would just roll his eyes and say that schmoozing wouldn’t get Gabriel out of balancing their account -

76 stops.

Their account.

*THEIR* account.

He flips back to the top of the page and could fucking hit himself over how stupid he’s been.

Because there are two IDs attached to this account.

“Jim Moreno and Gomez Ricardo?” Jack asks in the most shocked tone he can muster through his disgust. Looking up from the IDs, he makes a twisted face at Gabriel, who gives him his own sneer right back, “I didn’t assign the names, Jack.”

“I have a hard time believing that, Gomez.”

Gabriel glares at him for a second, and then gives him that trademark wolfish grin, and Jack’s stomach does a few flips.

“I may have offered some...suggestions,” Gabriel chuckles. Jack groans, “You asshole - Jim Moreno?? You had to suggest Jim??”

“Got a problem with that?”

“Why do I get the shitty name when you get something like Gomez Ricardo?”

“Oh my, Jack, do you think my fake name is good?” Gabriel’s shit-eating grin gets wider, “Are you jealous?”

“Gomez Ricardo is a terrible name, Gabriel, but it’s better than Jim Moreno.” Jack rubs his eyes, and pretends to be more annoyed than he actually is. He doesn’t actually give a shit about the names.

He just likes giving Gabriel shit for it.

“Well...” Gabriel says more softly, gently, and Jack eyes him suspiciously. Gabriel gives him that smirk again, but his eyes are more tender, “There’s an obvious solution to this.”

“And what the fuck is that?”
“You could always take my last name,” Gabriel murmurs coyly and Jack feels like the floor is dropping beneath him with how quickly his stomach swoops low at the words. Gabriel leans in real close, eyes dark and heavy and carrying that low, liquid heat from his voice. “Isn’t that what you want, Jack?”

“Gabriel, I -”

“I mean, Jim Ricardo is a better name, right?” Gabriel’s face twists back into that dumbass grin and that motherfucker.

“You asshole,” Jack shoves at him stupidly while Gabriel howls with laughter, that beautiful, hearty sound that Jack lov-

76 nearly doubles over at the raw, overwhelming grief that consumes him at the memory. It had been such a small, insignificant moment in nearly thirty years together, but tiny, tattered memories like this are all he now has of Gabriel Reyes.

He doesn’t want them.

He hates them.

They haunt him, remind him of the man he lost, the man he didn’t give nearly enough time and attention and energy to in his last few years - remind Jack of how he had managed to fail the one person he thought he never would.

Or never could.

He had taken Gabriel Reyes for granted and it had destroyed both of them.

And now some government bureaucrat is using Gabriel’s goddamn fake civilian identity to fuck with him.

Traitors, sellouts, corrupted wastes of air. Every last one of them.

He doesn’t trust them for shit.

Jack has never trusted them.

Not since they first put the needle in his vein and he had to watch as Gabriel writhed under the fervor of the chemicals in the bed next to him, screaming bloody murder in Spanish as Jack ground down on his teeth, biting his tongue and cheeks until they bled, as the pain consumed them both -

Jack looks up from the table he’s hunched over, eyes hard and cold like steel bullets.

Fuck them.

Fuck them all.

He’s going to take all of their money.

And then he’s going to fucking ruin their brand new toy bomb.

And then he’s gonna beat the shit outta some Deadlock members, just because he fucking can.

And he’s gonna make them all spit blood the way he did back in the SEP.
Just because he can.


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**Segador: Be Careful What You Wish For...?**

It’s 45 minutes before he has to go crawling back onto a fucking transport ship again when Reaper’s datapad dings.

With a miserable grumble at the prospect of being stuck back in a metal cage in the sky for four hours just to help a group of people he fucking *loathes*, he pulls out his datapad and sees that his EncrypID account has finished transferring the last incremental payment to his civilian account. He follows the anonymized, scrambled link to his main false civilian account and -

He pauses because

Because the numbers don’t make sense, Mason.

Reaper *knows* he is bad at budgeting - literally everyone in Overwatch and Blackwatch had known that. Oh, Gabriel had been great at managing and allocating resources, and he was pretty okay at math, but budgets had always been his least favorite task and it fucking *showed*. Jack would come to him at the end of each month, saying drearily that he needed to turn in his budgets and when Gabriel had given him that “uh...whoops” face, Jack would just sigh and offer to help.

But that was a different issue.

The point is, every version of Reaper is *bad* at budgeting.

But it doesn’t take an idiot to see that nearly seven-thousand U.S. dollars were spent over the course of two hours last night.

Reaper frowns deeply, clicking on the first one. Nearly three-hundred dollars spent at a grocery store in fucking...Cedaredge, Colorado? The next one is like five-hundred dollars at some goddamn clothing store, also in Cedaredge, Colorado. And on and on.

*What the fuck is happening in Colorado?*

Reaper rubs his exhausted face, his scars itching and burning a little with the frustration. Okay, maybe that was the wrong question to ask. He should probably be asking how someone accessed his fucking fake civilian ID bank account and managed to spend so much money so fast.

Some motherfucker in Colorado no less.

*Ignore the Colorado part,* the voice inside him hisses, *You have a security breach on your hands. Someone else has accessed your shit and you have no idea how or why. They might know who you are.*

Okay, security breach - protocols would be the same as in Blackwatch, just on a personal basis. First step would normally be fixing the issue immediately to prevent a leak of information, or slow it as much as possible. Questions would come after.
Problem is, he doesn’t even know how someone would get access to a dead man’s account.

*So a possible security breach at the banking company,* he thinks belatedly. He flips the datapad to another tab and searches for the company in the news. There are no major stories of a problem on their end, and Reaper sits back frowning.

*A personal attack then?* he wonders, but something keeps bothering him.

...*They didn’t buy anything major - no cars, jewelry, etc. But most identity thieves spend the money they steal on dumb shit anyways.* Reaper scans the list - groceries, clothes, more clothes, more...groceries...an auto-shop repair charge?

That’s a fuckton of clothes and food, Reaper realizes. Since he hadn’t really cared about either of those anymore, it takes him a second to realize there’s a really bizarre pattern here. He looks at the timestamps of the transactions and realizes something else.

Many of them are within just five to ten minutes of each other.

*A fucking cash grab.*

He knows what this is - he’s seen petty identity theft before. The thief takes the ID or the card and buys only a few actual items but then withdraws the max amount of money at the register. Hits up another store, rinse, lather, repeat. Typically the card might lock up but it’s possible it happened so fast the company hadn’t even processed it yet.

Now he’s really fucking confused. Some asshole in *Colorado* went out and bought a bunch of stuff and taken a bunch of cash so fast it made him a little dizzy to think about.

*Oh my GOD,* the voice nearly shouts, *Forget about the Colorado part! It’s not important.*

*No...* Reaper thinks slowly. *No, this one is important.*

**BUT WHY**

Reaper rubs at his face, mashing at his eyes, as if that will make him process the information faster. Something had just occurred in Colorado...

*You are being a paranoid fuck,* the voice chides, *This is why no one took you seriously about the issues in Blackwatch.*

Reaper drowns out the voice and concentrates.

See, Reaper knows a few things for certain: the 405 is always a bad choice; he’s bad at budgeting; being composed of smoke sucks dicks and not in the good way; he knows Cedaredge, Colorado.

He frowns as the name pulls at something deep in his brain-

“*Listen, I know we’re all exhausted from the Detroit Omnium, but I really think it would be beneficial to get out of the base and get some air...see some sights.*”

*Gabriel shoots a very skeptical look at Jack,* tittering, *‘See some sights,’ Jack? Really?*”

“I don’t fucking know; I don’t give a shit what we call it,” Jack mutters sourly, crossing his arms, “I’m just sick of being stuck in these bases all the time.”

“But the view here is lovely,” Ana says serenely, her back towards them. She’s looking out at the
dramatic landscape - great, steep slopes that drop away from the mesa’s plateau, the hills and divots covered in bright splashes of autumn colors, all under an endless blue sky. Gabriel has to admit that this was probably the prettiest Watchpoint so far.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t it be even nicer to actually be out there?” Jack asks, egging her on. Gabriel sees Ana stir a little at that - she loves exploring and hiking. Beside her, making her tall figure seem tiny, Reinhardt shakes his head, “I am too tired. I can barely stand. I don’t know how you have such energy, Jack.”

“It’s our first non-active battle day in two weeks!” Jack states, as if that explains his boundless energy, “And I want real food.”

“Asshole, I can make you some goddamn real food -”

“Out of the fucking rations, Gabe? You’re a good cook, but no one can salvage that,” Jack sighs. Gabriel scowls but Ana just mutters quietly, “He’s not wrong.”

“Ana.”

“Gabriel.”

“Why do you always take his side in this shit -”

“Someone has to steer you straight, Gabriel, and someone else has to help that someone,” Ana says, smirking as she turns towards him. Gabriel just rolls his eyes, “You just want to go for a hike, but I’m with Rein on this one - I’m way too fucking tired to climb around a goddamn nature table.”

“We don’t have to do that!” Jack adds in hastily, “There’s a town not too far from the foot of the mesa.”

“It’ll take us an hour to get out there,” Gabriel says but Jack is insistent, those radiant blue eyes grabbing at his heart, “They’ll have real supplies there, Gabe, including actual vegetables!”

That motherfucker knows all of Gabriel Reyes’ weak points.

“...Where is this town?” Gabriel growls and Jack looks smug at his victory. But godDAMN, if Gabriel goes one more day without bell peppers, he’s gonna lose his mind.

“We just head south on the highway. Here, I can drive us there,” Jack beams at him, as bright as the blue sky. “The town is called -”

Cedaredge.

Watchpoint: Grand Mesa had been broken into nearly 36 hours ago.

“Experimental heavy weaponry” had been stolen from the base.

A fucking heavy pulse rifle had been stolen.

A fucking vigilante had broken into Watchpoint: Grand Mesa and stolen a fucking pulse rifle.

A fucking vigilante dubbed Soldier: 76 had broken into Watchpoint: Grand Mesa and stolen a fucking pulse rifle.

How had he been so **blind**.
Beneath the mask, Reaper glares at the datapad, his scars stretching and twisting with the act but he feels a deep boiling fury rise in him.

*There are no coincidences.*

*No,* the voice tries to stop him.

*There are only connections -*

He taps “Watchpoint: Grand Mesa break in” into the search with a deliberate, seething slowness.

*You are insane.*

*-between larger forces -*

He clicks on the first article, and scrolls down to the images from the security cameras.

*Don’t start this, idiot.*

*-we do not yet have the ability to perceive.*

He doesn’t know how he fucking missed it - the stance, the height, the squared shoulders, the pistol on the thigh. The whole outfit is new, the visor now covers his whole face, and his hair is permanently bleached with age and stress now.

But the number 76 is blazoned on his back -

*Just like the stale, dry ink on his wrist - [76: John Morrison] flanked by bar codes.*

*Because the tattoos aren’t for their owners -*

*The tattoos of numbers and names aren’t for the owners -*

*But for the coroners.*

*He’s lost track of how many times he’s pressed a kiss to the dark ink of 76: John Morrison on Jack’s wrist -*

But the burning heat in Reaper’s core shakes with roiling emotions and he burns

Smoke is curling up from his mouth and his sleeves and his neck and he feels it as part of him and not him, dissipating into the room as the war within him resumes.

*Jack*

*Fucking*

*Morrison*

His core screams with burning pain and hatred and rage.

*THE ASSHOLE IS SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD.*

*No, stop*
I THOUGHT I FUCKING GOT HIM KILLED.

You didn’t do that, you didn’t even want the explosion to happen

HE DIDN’T FUCKING LISTEN

And you didn’t actually try to make him

HE IGNORED ME

Because you made such a great effort to contain your paranoid anger

HE HATED ME

That is not true

HE SACRIFICED EVERYTHING FOR FUCKING OVERWATCH

…

INCLUDING ME

He’s DEAD, you idiotic dumbass, the voice hisses, but Reaper knows. He knows. He knows Jack fucking Morrison would not have died in that explosion.

He could not have died in that explosion.

You are fucking in denial, fucking delusional! Reaper is beginning to wonder if he’s got a split personality, but the voice just huffs, I am your fucking conscience, asshole, fucking listen to me. You have a serious problem with grieving and handling your emotions. You don’t know how to live with or without Jack Morrison so you want him to still be alive, but -

No, Reaper thinks.

I’m talking now, asshole, fucking listen -

NO, you fucking listen to ME, he practically screams at himself as his anger consumes his conscience like the sun of his soul devours life. This goddamn motherfucker used me - me, his own husband, his own partner - to do all of Overwatch’s goddamn dirty work for decades! But when shit started to hit the fucking fan and he turned into an absolute coward, he suddenly found it in his heart to be a moralistic asshole and condemn everything I was - everything I am because of him - to be burned on the fucking pyre of Overwatch!

And with heart breaking all over again, Reaper whispers to the second pulse in his veins:

And then he left me.

Left me to suffer.

Refused to defy Overwatch and the U.N to help me

When all I needed was him.

He remembers.

He remembers.
He remembers the look of _heartbroken horror_ in those seadeep blue eyes, studded with stars and nightfallen shadows, as Jack had looked at him -

_and he hated all that I had done. For him. For us._

Reaper refocuses his gaze on the image on the datapad.

Those seadeep, starstudded blue eyes are _gone_ -

Replaced with a mask that _glows_ a violent, bitterburned light.

Reaper _glares_, fighting the urge to crack the glass of the screen with his claws.

_and now_

_after all this_

_I find out that Jack_

_Jack Michael Reyes Morrison_

_Is still FUCKING ALIVE._

_That he escaped that explosion_

_That he let them drag my name through the mud_

_That he ran like a COWARD as the United Nations BURNED ME_

_THAT HE ACTUALLY LET THEM LITERALLY FUCKING BURN ME_

_THAT HE LET ME BECOME THIS_

_THIS FUCKING THING_

_THAT AS I CRUMBLE AND BURN AND REASSEMBLE IN PAIN_

_THAT AS I FIGHT OFF THE URGE TO CLAW MY EYES OUT AND CRACK MY HEAD OPEN AND TEAR HOLES IN MY BRAIN_

_HE RIDES AROUND ON A FUCKING HARLEY_

_PLAYING SOLDIER_

_BECUSE HE FUCKING CAN_

_SO FUCK HIM_

_AND FUCK YOU TOO, GABRIEL, YOU DUMB MOTHERFUCKER_

Because he knows a few things:

The 405 is always a bad choice.

He’s bad at budgeting.

Being composed of smoke literally feels like Hell lives just beneath the surface of his skin, crawling
and slithering around in his lungs and heart and veins like parasitic worms, eating away at his nerve endings, chewing on his intestines, writhing around in the burning, melting, furious sun of his soul, his heart beat beat beating with a rhythm that is not his own, and that the explosion that they had been caught in had changed him from being simply “Reaper” into this unbearable hellspawn.

He knows Cedaredge, Colorado and that the country-fried steaks at the diner there are fucking delicious.

He knows Jack.

He knows Jack better than he knows himself.

And he knows Jack Morrison is alive.

_I know Jack Morrison is alive._

_And I want him to be alive._

_Because I’m not fucking done with that motherfucking asshole yet._

_Not until he knows me too._

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Chapter End Notes

CHOO CHOO

THIS TRAINWRECK (LOL) HAS NO BREAKS

(who's in control of this thing? Oh...right, it's me)
Chapter Summary

A soloist deals with her ornery teammates (or rather, just one ornery teammate in particular). A reaper re-encounters a man he'd rather forget (or rather kill, if he gets a chance). A falcon begins her mission (or rather, she thinks so). A shadow prepares for trouble (or rather, she tries to). A sharpshooter moseys INTO trouble (or rather...nah, he just straight up walks into it, lol). A soldier barely arrives on time (or rather - actually no, that one is accurate).

A deadlock begins.

[Traveling to Route 66 - Select Your Hero]

Chapter Notes

Song is "Bad Company" by Bad Company (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Get your kicks on Route 66

Rebel souls

Deserters we’ve been called.

Chose the gun

And threw away the sun.

Now these towns

They all know our name.

The six-gun sound

Is our claim to fame.

I can hear them say -

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The New Peacekeepers: Vigilante Justice - Vital in a Post-Overwatch World?

By Joel Morricone // Guest Blogger, Coffee Drinker, White Hat Wearer, Pundit for Hire
March 4, 2076 - Hanamura, Japan

Column - The scent of gunsmoke mingled with the aroma of gyoza following yesterday’s thwarted ramen shop robbery attempt. And while the mainstream media focused on the anachronistic fashion sense of the stranger who saved the day, I want to know whether he’s the self-appointed sheriff of the corner store, too. We’re told we live in an era of peace, but crime is running rampant and the authorities don’t seem to care. If folks like him want to protect us, maybe we should just let them ---

Soliste: Flying spiders are terrifying
Tuesday, June 30, 2076: 5:10 p.m. - Zaragoza, Spain

They’ve been in the air for all of ten minutes when Reaper starts fidgeting.  

Oh mon Dieu, Widowmaker curses to herself, slumping her head against the wall of the transport ship, What is the MATTER with him? She cannot recall if Gabriel Reyes was ever this fidgety before, but then again - 

She can hardly recall anything from before…

She blinks a few times in confusion.

It is best not to start this thought process today.

She does not like being stuck in a five-hour long transAtlantic flight either, and putting herself… “into a fit,” as her handler would say, is not ideal. Her sallow eyes roll past the shifting body of Reaper to glance at the four other Talon agents, all of whom are sitting still but looking uncomfortable being around him (or so she assumes). Louis, Iñigo, Henri, and Francesca, she remembers.

Widowmaker does not stay in set squads for very long.

She does not know why.

Although, in truth, she is often given missions alone.

She does not know why.

But she assumes it has to do with her being a sniper.
It is odd, then, that she is working with a full squad and Reaper on this mission.

She does not know why.

But it makes her brain itch a little in strange ways, like small insects are crawling around in the space between her skull and her grey matter. She rubs at an irritated eye, wishing she could scratch at her brain and satisfy the strange itching feeling.

More like gouge out her brain and -

No. No fits today.

She shifts her sniper-assault rifle in her hands a little and -

“Would you STOP?” Widowmaker snaps at the hulking, restless form next to her. The man (ghost? monster?) folds his arms and taps a foot impatiently, growling from behind his mask, “Why did we have to take such a small transportation ship?”

“I’m sorry, did you want to sneak across an ocean on a regular cruiser?” she hisses back, “We also have to sneak into another country, you know.”

“Anything would be better than this,” Reaper grumbles like a sullen child, and his tapping foot makes her want to bash his fucking head in, but instead she just rolls her eyes, muttering, “Next time you can take a rowboat.”

“Thank Christ, I’ll do that any day.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” she whines to herself, which gets a small, rumbling chuckle out of him that mildly surprises her. She blinks again in confusion.

She does not know what to make of him.

She remembers when Gerente first informed her of the ruthless mercenary targeting old Watchpoints and Blackbases and people related to Overwatch, but she did not think anything of it at the time. There were many out for Overwatch, even though it has been four years since the official disbandment. If someone else was out to help Talon even in small ways, she would not mind that.

She did, however, mind losing her kills.

She remembers walking into a deathly quiet Watchpoint, bodies strewn everywhere, bullets and rounds and spent ammo lying uselessly on the ground. In some places there had been almost no blood, and in others, near streams of it, running together in rivulets and puddles, leaking out of massive jagged holes in limp corpses, shotgun shells littering the floor. She had spent three days being briefed on this mission, preparing her routes, spec’ing her cameras, ensuring she had memorized the floorplan of the Watchpoint and the guard schedules by heart -

And someone had come in and obliterated everything in a few devastating minutes.

And that had infuriated her.

There had been no art to it, no beauty, no grace - it had been a cold, cruel, callously violent act that had robbed her of the pleasure of the kill and left only a disgusting, open, weeping mess in its wake.

After that, she had cared.

When her handler had detailed her on the mission to bring The Reaper in, she had been ready, ready
and willing, eager to put a stop to this killer who left no art, no beauty, ready to put a beautiful bullet through his monstrous head the moment negotiations would fail - because she knew they would fail.

She did not know why she knew this.

And yet, when the time had come, she had not put a bullet in his head. She had not even tried to. She remembers being entranced by smoke and the heat of fire, grappling herself out of the way as the liquid darkness had engulfed agent after agent after agent. She had been mesmerized by the surprising grace of it, by the high, hard edge of laughter, by the magic of the night sky absorbing the stars as bodies collapsed beneath its shifting form.

And she had been struck by him, when he had reformed, when she saw the dual shotguns, the battle-hardened stance, the cocksureness of his words and his threats.

Gabriel Reyes.

She frowns remembering him. She barely remembers him. He had been better friends with Gerárd -

A short, sharp, intake of air cuts straight from her lungs to the itch in her brain, which turns into a full aching throb, heady and pulsating and blinding like a migraine and she shudders a little, her eyelids snapping shut in pain and -

“What’s wrong, arañita?”

She did not expect those words.

She does not know why that is.

She blinks a few times in confusion as the stabbing pain recedes a little, glancing to her right. His foot has stopped tapping and his arms have gone a little slack with - is that concern in his voice, in his demeanor, in the tilt of his head?

She does not know.

His mask is turned towards her, angled slightly, as if waiting for her reply, and she imagines dark eyes assessing her features, working over her face like he’s analyzing some sort of problem, chunking out formulas and strategies, but there are no strategies for this.

Why is he here?

Why is he here?

Why is he here?

She does not know.

“I am fine,” Widowmaker mutters, bluffing a little. Reaper stares at her for half a second longer before rolling his head with a snort, “Good, don’t want you passing out on me. I don’t want to be left alone with the four Stooges for five hours. Oye,” he snaps at them, and the four Talon agents jerk at little at the sound, “Talk to me, I’m bored.”

“...I uh,” One of them - even though they’re not wearing their visors, it’s still hard to tell some of them apart, but Widowmaker thinks this one is Iñigo - stutters a little, “What...what should we talk about?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Reaper huffs, crossing his arms sternly again, “I don’t like flying in these tin
cans. They could have at least given us the ones with the beds.”

“...We have ships with beds?” the woman, Francesca, asks quietly, and Reaper sighs, “Talon better have ships with beds. Can you imagine them sending us to like, Australia in one of these? How far have you been on this kind of small ship?” he asks to Widowmaker, and she blinks once in confusion, before muttering, “I go everywhere on these ships.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I do not usually ‘ave a full squad with me,” she admits, but she does not know why - why it feels...strange to say that, “It is usually me and the pilot and per’aps one other agent for backup.”

Reaper looks at her like she said they would send her to the moon and back in sardine cans with fireworks attached to them.

“What the hell,” he grumbles, more a statement than a question, and that gets her to snort a little in derision. Maybe some humor too, but mainly derision. Americans and their vulgarities. “Y’all never slept in beds on a plane before?”

“We...do not usually leave the Mediterranean area,” another man - Henri, maybe? - speaks up in a French accent. He adjusts his gun in his hands a bit before adding on, “It is very odd that they are sending us on this mission.”

“Why’s that?” Reaper asks him and Henri shrugs a little, saying, “Usually they will send whatever agents they need to a place, and the closet Talon base will provide them with support. You know…” he glances between them, brown eyes flicking back and forth nervously, “You two would go, and then the nearest Mexico base would give you more agents. Not us.”

“Well, well, well, ain’t that a real piece of gossip,” Reaper mutters, and Widowmaker is surprised that he...appears to be thinking about it really hard. She shakes her head a little, as the pain has receded back down to an itch, and snorts, “I do not see why it is important.”

“All information is informative,” Reaper says cryptically, but there’s a twist to his tone that makes her think that he’s entirely aware that was the least helpful statement anyone has ever uttered.

*Quel salaud*, she thinks sourly, making a small pout, but he’s looking back at the agents, asking, “So does anyone here know anything about Deadlock or this damn mission they put us on?”

The four agents are glancing at each other, and Widowmaker scowls a little.

She thinks they know something.

She does not know why she thinks this.

Iñigo shrugs as much as the straps of the side seat will let him, saying, “We were informed it’s some sort of escort mission?”

“Hmm, that’s all the shit I got too,” Reaper grumbles, while Louis finally perks up gruffly, “The Juarez base will give us more information.”

“Riiight, so about this Juarez base,” Reaper sighs, “Are you telling me we have to go there first, and then cross over into the States, and then make our way to Deadlock Gorge?”

“That’s the general plan,” Iñigo nods, and Reaper rolls his head a bit, growling, “What a waste of time.”
“United States airspace is usually more protected than Mexico’s,” Francesca offers as an explanation, and Louis nods appreciatively, before adding on, “That’s true. Mexico barely has half the infrastructure of the United States, even with everything Portero has done.”

“You mean we have to go in by car?” Reaper snaps, and Iñigo says, “Probably by truck. I know that in parts of the Mediterranean area, we have to get into some places through commercial trucks.”

“Are you saying we have to cross the border in a fucking sixteen wheeler?” Reaper practically demands.

“It will be bigger than this transport ship.” Widowmaker snorts, but Reaper just jolts around to her, arguing, “No way, that means they’re putting us in a secret compartment, or - worse - putting us in boxes or some shit. Christ, it’s gonna be a nightmare.”

“Do you...not like small spaces?” Francesca asks, and Reaper’s head jerks towards her, eyeing her warily before saying, “I’m...not a fan. That’s for sure.”

“Do not be such a child,” Widowmaker mocks him and he slowly turns his head back towards her, and for some reason, she senses that her joke has truly irritated him in some way, but she does not know why -

Wait.

She does know why.

She frowns a little because -

“Breaking news: Watchpoint: Geneva is under heavy attack right now. Reports are coming in that an explosion has destroyed part of the Overwatch base, and it is currently unknown how many casualties will result from the blast -”

Widowmaker’s jaw goes slack slightly as the tele-projectors in the mess hall at Zaragoza blare to life with the Atlas News report. Other Talon agents stop dead in their tracks around the large room, all of them staring in surprise. There had been rumors there would be a major attack organized by the unknown heads of Talon “very soon,” but this?

But this was unprecedented.

No one had attacked a Watchpoint on this scale before -

She blinks once, snapping herself out of the memory, wincing a little at the pain it causes her head. She does not know why she struggles with remembering things so much. Reaper is watching her, his expression unreadable with that damnable mask he wears, but eventually he turns back towards the Talon agents across from them, asking in a gravelly tone, “So who here knows Spanish?”

Widowmaker sighs.

Mon Dieu.

It is going to be a long flight.

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Segador: Guns of Anarchy

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 7:13 a.m. - Deadlock Gorge, New Mexico, United States
It has been a LONGass journey to get here.

Too fucking long.

First there was the five hours in the transport ship, where he desperately made snarling small talk
with the other five (and he suspects he prevented them all from taking a nap, although Widowmaker
totally dozed off at one point, he knows it), and then they had been allowed like eight hours of rest at
the Juarez base, and then - just like Reaper had predicted - the six of them had been crammed into a
secret compartment in the frontmost part of a commercial trailer and then driven for another six hours
to Santa Fe and another two hours to Deadlock Gorge.

The Juarez base had been nothing worth noting - it was nearly identical to the Zaragoza base, which
only seemed to irritate Reaper’s bad mood even more. It’s like the fuckwads hadn’t even tried to be
original with their goddamn organization: they had literally just lifted the blueprints of different
Watchpoints and transplanted them for Talon’s purposes.

Fucking assholes.

The truck comes to a lurching halt and finally - finally - the end of this horrific process is near. The
four Talon agents groan and moan with relief as Widowmaker swiftly undoes her seatbelt, unlocks
the compartment doors, and just bolts, holy shit, she practically runs to the end of the trailer.

Reaper stands more slowly, stretching his aching joints and popping a shoulder once or twice,
cracking his neck a little. He fucking wants off of this damn truck as well, but he can’t bring himself
to run the way Widowmaker had. He trails after the Talon agents - Íñigo the informative Basque
guy, and Louis the boring one, Henri the French dude, and Francesca the charming Spanish-
Moroccan girl - and blearily steps into the dim lighting.

A cool, blue, metallic lighting barely casts any glow on the large, concrete warehouse, and even
though Reaper has been sitting in the dim, ungodly haze of the secret compartment for six hours, it
still takes his eyes a second to adjust. There are a number of burly tatt’ed men and beefy women
unloading the crates and boxes from the trailer, some of them just haphazardly piling them on top of
each other around the truck. Crates, boxes, packages - all sorts of shit, really - are packed into shitty
pillars and stacks in this receiving area, crammed into corners and shelving units in disarray, and
Reaper vaguely wonders if Deadlock is dealing in munitions or just grabbing literally anything they
can. Pockets of white light are speckled around nearby rooms and doorways, and he can see that
some of them lead to lounge areas with old, broken couches and chairs.

Widowmaker and the Talon quad have formed up beside a walking cement truck of a man - he’s like
70% pure fucking muscle and 30% ripples of fat, mainly around his gut, smothered in tattoos of
skulls and wings and all sorts of cliched biker shit that Reaper (the man dressed in a fucking skull
mask) eyes with mild disdain. He neither loves nor hates tattoos (his father had been covered in
them, so maybe there was...some prejudice lingering there), but at least be original about them - his
own tattoos stings a little at the mere thought and he feels a bitter, acrid taste sear his tongue. The
dark-tanned man has a surprisingly trim beard and a bunch of zigzags shaved into his head, and he’s
folding and unfolding his tree-stump-width arms in what Reaper assumes is an intimidating or
impressive manner.

Widowmaker sideeyes Reaper as he sidles up to the little crew of fuckwads and the bulldozer of a
dude turns to him, giving him a dark-eyed squint of a glare.

“Reaper,” Widowmaker says as conversationally as her dead soul can manage, “This is - ”
“Terry Hernandez,” Reaper mutters tartly, choking back the way he actually wants to spit the name out.

The hefty mixed-heritage biker sizes him up for a hot second, and then gives him a snarl of a grin, rumbling out, “I see my reputation precedes me.”

_I put your ass in jail, pendejo. And your ass was supposed to stay in jail._

_You also got Jesse addicted to cocaine._

_Do you know how long it took me and Jack to help get him clean?_

_Of course I remember your punk ass._

_I’m going to die thinking of your shitty fucking face and how much I hate it._

Reaper half-wonders if he can put a shotgun shell through the man’s skull in the middle of the mission today.

God, he fucking_ wants _to.

He doesn’t like consuming the souls of douchebags like Hernandez, because they feel fucking slimy going down, but he’d take special pleasure in eating this fucker -

As if reading his goddamn mind, Widowmaker shoots him the ugliest glare her pretty face can manage, and Reaper bites his tongue. A stray bullet may hit Hernandez at some point today.

...A stray one.

“You...have quite the reputation,” Reaper growls back. Reaper’s a big dude - just over six feet and a couple hundred pounds of muscle and...whatever souls are made of - but Hernandez looms over him at nearly six and a half feet. Reaper’s willing to bet, however, that Hernandez has neither the cocktail of drugs that SEP pumped into him, nor thirty-plus years of military training, nor the ability to turn into a fucking ball of smoke, nor the ability to suck the literal life energy out of a human.

_I could take you in a fistfight, motherfucker._

Because even though Reaper could win in all those other ways, he just wants to revel in beating the living shit out of this fuck.

“Yeah?” Hernandez continues with his shit-eating grin, “I got quite the dick too, _amigo._”

“Really? We’re gonna get into a dick size contest right now?” Reaper drawls out, lolling his head a little, “I don’t need to see your penis, _cabrón,_ my own satisfies me just fine.” Behind the mask, though, Reaper grins viciously, “Although if you wanna bend over, I’m sure it can satisfy you too - ”

_“MON DIEU,”_ Widowmaker hisses, stomping over to Reaper and shoving at him, “Be’ave yourself. If you fuck this up for me, I will not ‘esitate to put you down.”

“...Apologies,” Reaper mutters to her, pulling back a little, “I did not enjoy the six-fucking-hour truck ride here. I was practically riding on Iñigo’s lap.”

“And did you enjoy that part, little man?” Hernandez asks with a smile that seems to imply he thinks he has the most cutting of wits. Reaper rolls his eyes.

“More than I’ve enjoyed being around you, _pendejo._”
“Says the man who was begging for my ass just now - ”

“Oh, I’ll fucking teach you how to beg - ”

“Stop!” Widowmaker snaps at both of them, “Just stop. Boss man, gang leader, motorcycle driver, just tell us the plan and where to go and we will leave.” She glares with deadly precision at Reaper, adding bitterly, “I need to ‘ave some words with my squad.”

Hernandez stands back a little at her venom, before shrugging his massive shoulders and sighing, “Worry not, hermana, he doesn’t scare me. These assholes - their bark is worse than their bite.”

“I fucking bite alright - ”

“REAPER.”

Reaper sees that some of the Talon quad are giggling a little behind Hernandez’ back, before one of them - probably Louis, that straight-lace - gestures at them to stop. Hernandez squares himself back up, jerks a thumb over his shoulder and saying, “Right over here. Got the plans and the layout all set for ya.”

The schoolbus of a man strides off in that direction, leading the six of them into a better-lit side-room of dusty couches and more boxes of crap and a small, beat up coffee table with blueprints and a crude map laid out on it. They arrange themselves around the table, with Reaper standing as far away from Hernandez as he can manage, and the dump truck of a human being launches into his explanation:

“Bien, we got this information from a contact down in Dorado - she pulled this straight from Watchpoint: Grand Mesa’s files, so we know they’re legit, and we got a posse following the train up from the border as we speak. Basically, the U.S. military built this massive fucking bomb with LumériCo’s help, and now they gotta get ‘er into the country. But we wanna get our hands on that - think of the money this baby’s gonna bring in for Deadlock and Talon. So!” He smacks a meaty, inked hand onto another blueprint, one that shows the nearby train bridge with what Reaper - genius military strategist that he is - can see are a bunch of bombs at the metal joints.

“We’re gonna blow the train - ”

“Do you think that maybe - just maybe - blowing up a bridge with a fucking military-grade bomb on it is...not a great idea?” Reaper growls, and Widowmaker shoots him another bitter glare.

Hernandez, genius military strategist that he is not, frowns a little at this, before saying, “Ya know… we’re just gonna have to roll with it because we don’t got any other options.”

“...We could hijack the train?” You know, like normal terrorist assholes.

“Nah, they got extra security on there - brought in some fancy Helix guards from Egypt itself after that shitshow in Grand Mesa two days ago. Gonna be extra tough to stop it without heavy fire power.”

This is a recipe for disaster.

“Anyways, y’all ain’t even gonna be at the blast site,” Hernandez continues, sliding onto the crude overhead map of the gorge. Reaper can see some of the buildings that line the winding road of Deadlock Gorge, as Hernandez points a baton of a finger at some of the buildings closest to the entrance to the Deadlock base, “Y’all are gonna be here and here - ” he points to a tunnel on the southern side of the map, cut into the cliffs, “We think that posting y’all up in the tunnel o’ mysteries
here and in the guard house here -” he moves his hand to the building on the north side of the road, the one built into the bluff, “- will best suit our needs. The gang and I - we’re gonna be out here, in the diner -” he moves his finger to the far west side of the map, to the building almost directly under the blast site, “- so that we can jump on the cargo *rapido*, get ‘em while they’re surprised. If everything goes according to plan, we’ll meet up with y’all at the first gate here, and it should be smooth sailing into the base.”

“Except for the part where the military and Helix fucking rain hellfire on us, right?” Reaper asks, and he sees some of the Talon agents glance at each other, “Cause you didn’t mention that part.”

“Well, yeah, no shit they’re gonna be pissed. But don’t you worry your ugly little head, *hombre de craneo*, we’re gonna take care of the worst of ‘em. Got us some heavy duty shit, if you know what I mean.” Hernandez flashes a toothy grin and Reaper rolls his eyes.

Blowing up a bridge, a military-grade bomb, and rocket launchers.

Fucking *swell*.

“Why even bring us here if you weren’t gonna let Widowmaker snipe for you?” Reaper asks sourly.

“Well, uh…” Hernandez stumbles over his genius military strategy, “She can, uh...snipe from the cliffside where you’re at.”

“Does it have a view for sniping?” he snaps at the gang leader who mumbles, “I...uh...don’t know?”

Reaper sighs, rubbing at the forehead of his mask as if that would help clear up his real headache at all before muttering, “Alright, listen, here’s a better plan -”

“No one asked you, *cabrón* -”

“No, no one did, but you know, Widowmaker can’t fail this mission and, frankly, right now, this mission is a failure. How ‘bout instead, we’re gonna be posted here, on this cliff -” Reaper points a talon at the cliff just east across the road from the diner, but on the non-blast side, “- Widowmaker and - which one of you assholes can snipe? Oh, Henri, right - Widowmaker and Henri will be up here, and once the blast is cleared, you two will start sniping the wreck survivors. If they’ve brought in Helix from Egypt, that means Raptora Mark VI units, which are fliers with rocket power, so you’re gonna want snipers on the scene ASAP. Me and these other assholes, we’re gonna be posted up in this ground tunnel just beneath Widowmaker and Henri, so we can help out with some of the ground units that are bound to show up - they always fucking do. If we move fast, we can get the payload past this cliff and by this building here before they even know what hit them. AT THAT POINT, we can start fanning back out - no need to put all of our eggs in one basket, that’s just begging for us all to get blown the fuck up. Widowmaker’s squad will back out to the positions you originally suggested, but we’ll crawl on it, moving behind that building and up to the tunnels by the first gate. There’s gotta be a second or even third military train of support for this - there’s no way in fucking hell they’re letting this go with only one train. That means backup will be hitting us just before the first gate if we’re unlucky, or just past it if we’re lucky - we want it to be past the first gate as soon as fucking possible, so that we can block them off if need be. Shoring up these tunnels around the gate is gonna be a pain in the ass, why do you even have them here? But well, I guess we’ll just have to fucking deal with them. I don’t like the look of this curve with all these buildings here - ridiculously fucking open to airstrikes and heavy ground-level pushes, but we’ll just have to ambush them out of the buildings instead - I take it you don’t give a shit if these shitholes are still standing after this?”

Reaper pauses, but when the tractor of a man doesn’t respond, he finally looks up from the map to
see that…

Oh.

They’re all staring at him.

Oh shit.

“Uhhhh, so is that a no?” Reaper asks hesitantly when Hernandez finally…

Guffaws with barking laughter.

“Holy shit, amigo, I take back everything I said earlier, you can fucking RUN this shit. Holy shit, man, where the fuck are you from? That’s an American accent you got on you.”

“Uh…I did, uh…covert ops for the U.S. government for a time. Black ops kinda shit,” Reaper stammers out, barely remembering his lie he told to Gerente, “Got fucked over by them eventually, went out for the money, you know the shit. We did smash and grabs like this all the time.” The Talon agents are looking at him with a variety of expressions - Louis suspicious, Henri in shock, Inigo looking a little lost, Francesca smirking broadly, and Widowmaker -

Widowmaker is looking at him with a surprising amount of awe in her large, golden eyes, eyebrows scrunched slightly in perplexing confusion, mouth hanging open slightly, like she cannot believe he just spat in her soup or something.

“I, uh…sorry, squad leader, does this work for you?” he asks her, and her jaw snaps shut, her eyebrows dip in focus and she nods, looking back at the map, “Oui, oui, this, this works. The starting sniping positions are not…magnifique, but ‘Enri and I, we will make it work. If we ‘ave to bail early, I will trust you and the others to cover us, oui?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah, we got you, right guys?” Reaper says, looking at the other three, who hastily nod in agreement, and he continues, “Yeah, we’ll get you back up on the cliff up on the north side, just across the building, so when you bail just let me know and we’ll give you cover to get up there.”

“Oui, that will work as well as it can,” she nods, and Hernandez just chuckles, “Sounds like y’all got it all worked out.”

“I expect you and your gang to push from the diner, by the way,” Reaper snaps at him, “Don’t go easy because we’ve changed the plan.”

“Of course not, son, we want this shit more than you do.” He stands back up a bit, folding his arms, grinning widely, “I got a number of contacts who will be more than pleased to pay a pretty penny for this.”

Fucking asshole, I bet you do. I’m gonna put a bullet in your head the second your back is turned.

“Bien, bien,” Hernandez says, smacking his hands together, “Let’s get moving, crew -”

“Hang the fuck on,” Reaper snarls, “What’s the contingency plan?”

“…Contingency plan?”

“…For when things go to shit?” Reaper clarifies, because he cannot believe he actually has to explain this to a fucking drug dealer and murderer ex-con.

“…It’s not gonna come to that,” Hernandez scowls, as if Reaper just insulted his tattoos, “Is it,
“Literally all best laid plans of mice and men go awry, asshole, or did you forget the fact that you spent like two decades in prison?”

Hernandez cracks his neck at the actual insult but Reaper refuses to back down, rising to his own full height and pointing a clawed finger at the overhead map, snarling, “This will go to shit. I guarantee it. It’s fucking charming that you think a half-assed plan will even get us past the first cliff, because the full force of the United States’ military and a squadron of flying rocket armor are gonna be boring down on our assholes the entire time. So let me ask again - when you and your gang are getting bullets and rockets through your fucking chest cavities, and our squad is desperately trying to control the chaos, what, exactly, are you gonna do when it turns out you sucked on a bigger dick than you could deepthroat? Because don’t think I’ll hesitate to drag Widowmaker and like, two more of these Talon jerkwads into the cliffs to escape, because I fucking will.”

“...If things go to shit,” Hernandez says slowly, uncertainly, and a flicker of fear passes on his frowning face, “You run your asses back here, tails between your legs, and you lock down the base. Half the gang is gonna be here, just holler at them and they’ll barricade the shit down. Got it?”

“...That’s as good as it’s gonna get, huh? Fine. Can we take this?” Reaper points to the crude overhead map, and Hernandez shrugs, still a little nervous at the prospect of well….

Dying for a bomb.

“Don’t matter to me,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his thick neck, “We got the place memorized, not like it’ll do much for us.”

“Cool, great party favor, I’ll fucking hang this in my dorm room back in Spain,” Reaper growls, rolling his eyes. He turns to Widowmaker, who is eyeing Hernandez suspiciously, muttering, “We ready? Let’s go get in position.”

“Train’s scheduled to be here in two hours. Y’all are gonna be waiting out there for awhile -” Hernandez starts, and Reaper tilts his head at him, snapping, “We’ve only got two hours for scouting and recon, that’s fucking nothing.” He gestures to the door, and Widowmaker flicks her head, leading the way, the Talon quad following her out.

Reaper pulls up the rear of the group, muttering to himself about wringing necks and breaking bones when, a hallway before they reach the massive warehouse doors to the Gorge, Widowmaker flips around and squares up to him.

“I do not mind if you want to take charge, Reaper,” she hisses, pressing a long finger to his chest as if she could push him over with just that, “But warn me next time.”

“...It was not intentional, araña,” he mutters, only somewhat apologetic, and she snorts, “I do not care. If your plan gets us out of this disaster alive, I want you in charge.”

“...Qué?”

“You ‘eard me, salaud,” she says, smirking a little, “I am not good at these kinds of missions so per’aps you will do better.”

He frowns, as she shoulders her gun, a petite, wicked grin on her face, and she turns to the other four, snapping, “You ‘eard ‘im, imbéciles - we do not rest until we can walk this god awful place with our eyes closed.”
Fareeha sits quietly in the dim lighting of the steel-reinforced train car, shifting her thoughts like the winds shift sand.

The rattling at this point hardly affects her - indeed, she had always had a great constitution for motion and movement. It was one of the reasons Helix had assigned her to the experimental Raptora squadron, and she had taken to the Mark VI like a fish to water or a bird to air. The fluidity of the armor’s rocket jumps and propulsion had felt as natural to her as walking, and the more she used the equipment, the more at home she felt inside of it, both on the ground and in the skies.

But more important than that was taking to Helix’s military-style organization.

Angela was always a little sad to hear her say this, but Fareeha knew the military was in her blood, in her sinew and tissues and heart and soul. Her mother had been shaped by it, molded by it, crafted into one of the greatest female supersoldiers the world had ever seen, a hero who had helped saved the world from certain destruction and protected the peace that followed. Fareeha had known from early on that her only calling in life was to follow in her footsteps.

But Fareeha could not snipe for shit.

Fortunately, neither the Egyptian military nor Helix security had cared about that: the former had been more than impressed at how Fareeha had excelled in all other areas and marks, and the latter had been more than happy to offer her a position - any position of her choosing - in their company. And when they had suggested trying the Raptora program, Fareeha had known - in her blood, sinews, tissues, and soul - that she wanted to try flying more than anything else.

Angela had always said flying was a truly magical experience - that even when there was chaos and war and destruction around her, she could count on the Valkyrie suit to guide her to where she needed to be, that flying and gliding were moments of quiet and calm in a world of uncertainty and violence -

“We’re entering the gorge now.”

Fareeha immediately snaps her attention to Captain Khalil, who is sitting across from her. His visor is lifted, dark eyes gazing at her thoughtfully, and she nods at him forcefully. To her right - his left - sits the rest of his squad: the four other humans, all dressed in varying versions of the Mark VI, and the Omnic Okoro at the very end, fiddling with a holo-display of the gorge. Okoro had been working on planning out every detail of their route, ensuring that each of them were updated with every segment of the map as the train crawled its way through Mexico and into the United States, and even now - as they were entering what Khalil considered to be the most dangerous part of their journey - the staff officer was running logistics on the layout of the gorge.

“We will only be crossing the gorge for a minute and 14 seconds, Captain Khalil,” Okoro says in their electronic tones, “Forty-eight seconds of that will be over the gorge proper, and twenty-six seconds will be spent over a part of United States Route 66 and the cliff tunnel before the train returns to ground level on the other side.”

“Do you think it is possible the Deadlock gang will attack us on the other side of the cliffs?” Khalil
asks, glancing down towards the Omnic. The logistician shakes their head, replying, “It is highly unlikely - such positioning would not be to their tactical advantage. If we believe in what the CIA informed us, Deadlock will wish to acquire the package, which means their only strategic point of operation will be when the train is over the road.”

“Will they attempt to hijack the train?” Saleh, directly to Fareeha’s right, asks uncertainly. He twists his rocket launcher nervously and Fareeha understands. Fighting in small compartments - on a moving transportation system no less - is a tremendous disadvantage to the Raptora squad. The Mark VI units were designed for open-air, wide-landscape combat, not close-quarters fighting.

“Unless they have already infiltrated the train, this too, is unlikely,” Okoro responds, tapping at something on the holo-projection, “This means their major recourse of action will be either stopping the train or derailing it.”

“...Oh Allah,” Tarq breathes and Okoro - with their dry sense of humor - merely states, “Indeed. Brace for impact, friends.”

The train whistles, and simultaneously, the six human members of the Raptora squad snap their visors close, the seals on the Mark VI armors tightening, and -

The explosion rips through the fore part of the train, and the impact rattles through into their car unceremoniously -

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**Semáforo: The best laid plans**

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:54 a.m. - on the northbound U.S. military train into the Deadlock Gorge

Sombra munches on her pre-packaged sugar bun as she scrolls through her holo-projection.

Life had been pretty dull hiding out in the back of the military train, but admittedly, it had been pretty damn easy too, *de verdad*. Her cloaking still needed a bit of work, but it had been more than enough to sneak her onto the train before it had left Dorado, and it had proven infinitely useful since - every time the train had stopped to refuel, or get supplies, or let the guards off to eat, she would don it, rush out, buy some more food, then get back on before anyone could even notice.

And the security on the train itself had been *shockingly* bad. Like, atrocious. Just out of this world miserable. Every now and then, someone would loudly come clanging into the supply car, she would put on her cloak, they would poke around some boxes, and then leave. There were no cameras anywhere, no sensors.

*Mierda*, she had even popped out to hang out on the back railing a few times, letting the solar-panels in her back recharge the biosystem’s batteries with ease.

An alert from her biosystem beeps at her, startling her attention away from the article she’s reading and to the little timer that pops up in the corner of her projection.

*Ah, ya era hora.* (tn: it’s about time)

She shoves the rest of the pan into her mouth, crewing through the sticky-sweet mess slowly as she stands and stretches, snapping her bag over her shoulder. She wanders over to the back door of the train car and, after a moment of fiddling with the lock, slides it open easily. She steps out on the
windy platform, admiring the beauty of the gorge and the depth of the sky as the train chugs across the high-rise tracks. She slides herself down, locking her arms around a number of hand-hold bars, and curls herself up.

If there’s anything to say about Terry Hernandez, leader of the Deadlock gang, arms dealer, massive pendejo through and through, it’s that the man is miserably predictable.

And that he loves his explosives.

Even though she knows what’s coming, her stomach still does a few flips in anxiety as -

The train whistles and then there’s a roaring, blasting sound and concussive ripples as the entire train shudders and rattles and screams its death throes -

Sombra turns her invisibility on.

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Segador: You cannot plan for trouble

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:54 a.m. - inside the tunnel east of the Panorama Diner

“Alright, let’s run through it one more time.”

Over the comms, Widowmaker and the other Talon quad members groan, with Iñigo muttering, “We knooooow it already.” Reaper looks at Iñigo, who is sitting directly in front of him, and snaps, “Asshole, I’m right here.” Iñigo at least has the tact to look embarrassed, but the comms crackles in his ear and Widowmaker’s voice hisses at him:

“We ‘ave literally spent two hours going over this, you are only making them more anxious, salaud.”

“You can literally never be too prepared when your life is on the line,” Reaper chides, noting the way Louis rolls his eyes. He points a talon at the bastard, murmuring, “I saw that, fuckwad, and I’ll remember that when picking which of you four assholes I wanna save.”

“You literally have no life to lose,” Widowmaker mutters, and Reaper could bash his head against the wall.

He, Louis, Iñigo, and Francesca are sitting in the cool, soft orange shadows of the tunnel just east across the road from the Panorama Diner - Widowmaker and Henri are hanging out just above them, away from where the blast will hit the worst. Even so, Reaper knows they’re all gonna be choking on dust and smoke in a few moments.

Just like the Swiss Base.

Fucking brilliant.

How had he managed to put himself in this situation?

Reaper sighs, glancing back down at the map. It had his shoddy ass handwriting scribbled all over it, arrows and remarks pointing down routes and lines like a fucking football play. No one had brought a pen except Louis, which Reaper guesses is a point in his favor, but not enough to make up for the sass the jerkoff kept displaying towards him.
“I just...I want us all to be clear - like one-hundred percent Venetian glass clear - on what’s gonna happen when this whole thing gets completely fucked up,” he growls, and he hears Francesca mutter to Iñigo, “Isn’t Venetian glass...colorful?”

“We all know the routes,” Widowmaker sighs back over the comms, “You practically beat it into us.”

“I just...really fucking hate this place. And Deadlock. And Hernandez,” Reaper admits, folding his arms. Iñigo pops up a little, asking, “Why is that, sir?”

“Not a lot of good memories here, fucking firefight and lotta bullshit, this is where I picked up the damn kiiiiiiiiiingate,” Reaper barely recovers as Widowmaker practically hisses into his ear like a snake.

Oh holy fuck.

That had been ridiculously close.

“...Ingrate?” Francesca asks, rolling the word on her tongue, “I do not know this word.”

“It’s uh, it’s, hey wait, what time is it?” Reaper snaps, and Louis flicks his visor on before mumbling, “It is eight-fifty-six, sir.”

“Oh shit, we detonate in like, seconds. Visors on, fuckers, switch to shared comms ASAP.”

They do as they’re told and Reaper presses a finger to his ear, clicking the device up a channel when he hears -

“PUT A BULLET IN HIS HEAD, HERNANDEZ - ”

“ASSHOLE, THE TRAIN IS HERE, WE CANNOT ALERT THE MILITARY THIS CLOSE TO DETONATION - ”

“What the fuck is happening?” Reaper growls over the comms, but his question is ignored amid the sound of people shouting and scrambling about, and Reaper asks again, “Hernandez, what the fuck is going on? Are you ready or not?”

Again, the sounds of some shit crackles over the comms, and Widowmaker’s voice breaks in, wondering, “Do we still go through with it?”

“Well, if they actually manage to do it - ” Reaper starts, when Hernandez’s voice cuts him off:

“BLOW IT!”

Guess so.

In the fraction of a second that he has, Reaper shuts his eyes -

But nothing can brace him for the horrific noise that tears through him like a knife through paper.

Yup.

He is definitely in over his head.

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Jesse had a real knack for literally walking himself into trouble.

So some keen part of his mind is hyperaware of the fact that literally walking into Deadlock Gorge like nothing was wrong was basically begging for trouble.

The real problem is that Jesse and trouble? Well, they were made for each other. Not only did he have a habit of walking into it, at this point in his life, he pretty much welcomed it like an ol’ family friend. He was sure as shit tired of it, but he literally had no other ideas for what to do with himself other than wrassle with it, beat it over the head, and escape from the consequences by the sole of his boot.

Which is why, of course, he was moseyin’ into Deadlock Gorge in the first place.

This is a reeeeeeal dumbass idea of yers, the keen voice mutters into his head, and Jesse snorts a little in agreement, but it had been a tough-as-nails journey just to get to Santa Fe in the first place. His, uh… “friend” in Japan had given him the heads up about Deadlock coming back into power in the States, and how it was lookin’ to establish itself internationally. Jesse didn’t like that none, so after poking around Japan for a bit, wandering up to Korea, and then smugglin’ himself on a black market transport ship to the States, he’d made it into Oregon. He’d of course found trouble almost immediately, encountering theft and hold ups and hijackings and even Talon in towns, buses, train stations, fuckin’ everywhere, and it had taken him nearly three months of hitchhiking, buses, trains, and straight up walking just to get here from Japan.

Okay… maybe he had spent a little too much time in Japan. But could you blame him?

His “friend” in Japan had been…very generous.

…in a lot of ways.

Jesse meanders out of the cliff tunnel into the bright sunlight, and dips his hat a little against the glare, eyes taking a moment to adjust.

Even though it’s been twenty years since he was last here, Jesse thinks he’ll never get tired of this view.

The road winds up a ways before him before making a left and curving along the cliffs. Beyond the curve, the cliff sides drop off into a steep canyon, plunging hundreds of feet into the earth to the winding river below. Even though the sun is up and hot in the sky, there are dark, cool, curling shadows in the gorge, circling around the steel beams and pipes latticing into the depths. They support the railroad running across the gorge, passing directly over Jesse’s head and into an upper tunnel in the cliff above him. To his right sits the Panorama Diner, which used to make the best burgers around but the worst fucking coffee it’s ever been his misery to drink. The paint is chipping…quite a bit on the outside, and it looks as old as Jesse feels, but there’s a sense of nostalgia about just being around its presence and -

Jesse pauses.

There are people in the doorways looking at him.
Jesse frowns a li’l.

The people are pointing at him.

Hmm.

Looks like he did, in fact, walk into trouble.

Jesse puts a hand to Peacekeeper and -

The doors burst open and there’s a shout that’s oddly familiar:

“JESSE. FUCKING. MCCORMICK.”

Peacekeeper is up and pointed directly at the people bursting out the doors when:

“WAIT, WAIT - ASSHOLES, I SAID, WAIT!”

Jesse’s scowl deepens because he hasn’t heard that voice in twenty years.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Jesse drawls, but doesn’t lower Peacekeeper as the burly bull of a man pushes his way through to the front of the crowd, “If it ain’t jefe mayor Terry Hernandez himself. The hell you doin’ outta jail?”

“Fixin’ up all the problems you caused, you piece of shit,” Hernandez snarls at him, striding towards him, the crowd behind him surging forward along with him. Jesse takes a few steps back, readying some flashbangs in his metallic hand, biting at his lip, muttering, “Easy there, Terry, you don’ wanna fuck with this gun -”

“You mean, MY gun, the gun that I gave you, you son of a bitch -” Hernandez is only a few feet away, a single stride for a man of his stature and Jesse aims the flashbang to throw it -

When something flashes in his eyes and his vision whites out.

Boy, he was in some deep shit now.

He feels a fist in his gut and he doubles over as a large hand grabs at his neck and Jesse is jabbing Peacekeeper into Hernandez’s neck based on pure instinct and years of Blackwatch training. He’s ready to pull the trigger when he feels another set of hands on his normal wrist and there’s shouting and dust and his vision is coming back in bits and pieces, and he feels Peacekeeper drop from his hand as someone twists his arms behind his back -

“JUST PUT A BULLET IN HIS HEAD, HERNANDEZ - ” someone is yelling and Hernandez is shouting back, “ASSHOLE, THE TRAIN IS HERE, WE CANNOT ALERT THE MILITARY THIS CLOSE TO DETONATION - ”

“FUCKING WHAT” Jesse shouts just to hear his own voice, but what the fuck was this about a train and detonations -

They are dragging him along and he finally gets his head up to see. There are cuffs on his wrist behind his back, and no matter how hard he jerks, he can’t get them off, can’t shake off the rough hands on his arms and back. He glances back and sees Peacekeeper lying sullenly on the ground, and he thinks, *Wait fer me, amigo, I’ll get right out this, just wait -*

They’re dragging him into the diner where the doors slam shut behind them and the guys behind him throw him bodily to the floor as a train whistle overhead fucking *rattles* all the windows and Jesse’s
teeth -

“BLOW IT,” Hernandez screams and in the commotion, someone somewhere in the diner hits something that beeps and Jesse -

An explosion rocks the world into an earthquake and the sound of steel beams screaming and tearing rips through the air and suddenly there’s a second explosion as huge metal train cars come crashing down only a few feet from the doors, right where Jesse had been standing only half a minute ago -

Holy fuck.

Jesse had truly walked into it this time.

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Soldado: Roadtrippin’

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:57 a.m. - The Northwest tunnel into Deadlock Gorge

76’s eyes narrow as he spots the tunnel into the cliffs of Deadlock Gorge just ahead. Alongside the upwards winding cliff ramp into the tunnel runs the train tracks, pattering out from an upper tunnel cut above the road until the steel beams melt back into the ground. He’s already pushing the motorcycle to as fast as its core engine will run, but he chokes down on the throttle a bit harder, trying to squeeze every last bit of juice out of it as he guns it to the very edge of its speedometer.

C’MON, C’MON, C’MON, SO CLOSE -

There’s a train whistle in the distance and then -

A rattling explosion ripples out from beyond the bluffs and 76 is convinced he sees the cliffs shake as a roll of dust puffs out of the tunnels. Part of the train shoots forward, smashing out of the upper tunnel as it derails and falls - fortunately not on the road. There’s the piercing cry of metal being ripped apart and the subsequent crashing and mini-explosions of train cars slamming into hard-baked earth. 76’s old motorcycle is crying with how hard he’s punching the rocket cylinders, but it skids into the dust and the darkness of the tunnel -

C’MON, C’MON, C’MON -

A train car smashes into the south side of the tunnel and 76 slams on the brakes, turning into the road as the rockets die dramatically, whining with gasping breaths. The bike isn’t gonna stop in time -

76 jumps off, supersoldier reflexes and training kicking in as his military grade boots grip at the cracked pavement, the momentum of the drive tugging him forward even as gravity and pressure drag him back. He falls into a relaxed roll, tumbling a few times before ending in an admittedly dramatic crouch, slinging his bag forward in one smooth motion. His hands catch it, deftly opening the zipper as he watches the faithful, old bike slam heavily into the ruins of the train car.

God bless you, soldier, he thinks wryly as he pries the heavy pulse rifle out of the duffel, dumping the bag in a corner of the tunnel, You served me well. May you rest in motorcycle heaven, or what the fuck ever, I got shit to do.

76 launches himself at the skeletal remains of the bike, using it as a foothold to jump up to the top of the train car, grappling himself up and over and -
Holy fuck, there are already bullets flying by.

Gunfire and even a few rockets are whizzing left and right, and 76 dives off to the right, using the fallen train car as shelter. He immediately spots an old diner, the far south doors are being peppered with bullets both coming at them and out of them, but the north doors, the ones closest to him -

Those are open.

76 charges straight into them, lifting the heavy pulse rifle as he goes and just as he makes it through the doors -

He trips over something on the first set of stairs.

“JESUS FUCKING - ” 76 swears as he tumbles forward and the lump beneath his feet groans loudly, muttering, “Holy shit, partner, are those fucking steel-toed boots, hot fucking dogs, why did I do this -”

76 slams into the floor, the heavy pulse rifle almost slipping from his grasp, and in a jerking, instinctive motion, he twists himself around, pointing the gun at -

Oh.

Oh holy fuck on a cross in front of Jesus and all the saints, what.

He literally never thought he would see this in his life.

His informally adopted son Jesse McCree is writhing around on the floor, moaning and groaning about his stomach, hat and serape and cliched cowboy getup and all.

What the fucking fuck

“Ah, bien, you made it in time, soldado.”

And, because this moment just isn’t quite unbelievable enough -

A woman with a dyed mohawk, light-up biopanels decorating the shaved parts of her head, dressed in all purples and pinks, appears out of thin fucking air in the doorway. Her bright eyes rove over him, and then over McCree, and she gives a low whistle:

“Well, well, a real life vaquero too. Just my lucky day. I could always use more bodyguards for this.”

“Who the fuck are you,” 76 demands, pointing the gun at her, as Jesse struggles uselessly to sit up. The woman, her dark face backlit with the brightness of the sun and the flares of explosions behind her, smirks maniacally at them, giving them a small flourishing wave with her lit-up fingers.

“Me llamo Sombra. ¿Qué tal, soldado y vaquero?

“You’re gonna help me destroy this bomb.”

--------

And I say it’s bad company,

Oh yeah yeah
Bad company
'Til the day I die

Tell me that you are not a thief
Oh, but I am.

Bad company -
It’s the way I play.

Dirty for dirty.
Oh, somebody double-cross me,
Double-cross, double-cross.

Chapter End Notes

ALRIGHT. STEP RIGHT UP - PLACE YER BETS HERE:

In this corner, we got "Move the Payload" - Team Widowmaker and the Reapettes.

In this corner, we got "Stop the Payload" - Team Flying Rocket Armor.

In...another corner, we got "Destroy the Payload" - Team Tired Dad and his Two Adult Kids Who Still Think They're Teenagers.

Next weeek - a special multi-part episode!

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If you like Jesse McCree and a certain Japanese archer, maybe you wanna read how they met?

"Sharpshooter: Hit Me Like A Drum" (rating: T)
Chapter Summary

[Select Your Hero]

Map: Route 66

Defenders: Reaper, Widowmaker, Talon Agents - Henri, Louis, Francesca, Iñigo; Deadlock members

Attackers: Helix Raptora - Captain Khalil, Lieutenant Fareeha Amari, Saleh, Aizad, Mahmud, Tarq, Okoro (non-combatant); US soldiers

Destroyers: Sombra, Soldier: 76, Jesse McCree

[5...4...3...2...1...]

Chapter Notes

Alright, here's how this is gonna work.

I don't like breaking up battle scenes, but it's...not really feasible to have like 100 pages of solid writing in Google Docs. And it's also not really fair to readers who want to hit a "good pausing point." So battle scenes are broken up into multiple chapters.

However, I don't like the idea of uploading a single battle into multiple weeks. I think it disrupts the flow and urgency of the action, and for those of you who feel the same, you should be able to read it all in one go.

So I've uploaded multiple chapters - the entirety of the Route 66 battle - this week.

If you want to read the entire thing in one sitting, be my guest! That's what it's here for. And if you get halfway through and think, "Wow, this is kind of a lot - I'd rather read the rest of this tomorrow," you can do that too!

Have fun, friends!

And remember -

STAY ON THE PAYLOAD.

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Song is "Come With Me Now" by Kongos (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Overwatch: Now Arriving at Route 66

Afraid to lose control
And caught up in this world
I've wasted time, I've wasted breath
I think I've thought myself to death

I was born without this fear
Now only this seems clear
I need to move, I need to fight
I need to lose myself tonight

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The Rolling Stone Adventurer: Consider This - Route 66

By Mac Kerricher // Blog Columnist, Adventurer, Roadtripper, Tea Drinker, Mustache Enthusiast

On today’s “Consider This,” I go into the history of the Main Street of America, and discuss how recent events have affected it.

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It takes me all of an hour and a half to get out of Santa Fe’s crumbling suburbs, through the decaying buildings and streets of La Cienega, and out onto the beat up, semi-paved roads of the winding canyon to even reach Deadlock Gorge.

Alright, now, I know what you’re thinking:

You’re thinking, “But Mac, Deadlock Gorge is a backwater town of gangs and drug dealers.”

And you’re right.

But it also has some of the most beautiful landscapes to offer on the historic Route 66.

And before you judge me too harshly, consider this:

Historic Route 66 was once the most iconic “road” in the United States. Once called the Main Street of America, it ran nearly 2,500 miles across the heart of the nation, from Chicago, Illinois to Santa
Monica, California. It displayed some of the most gorgeous, incredible scenery this country has to offer, and it guided people west during the First Great Depression of the early 1900’s. In the 1940’s, it contributed to its fair share of America’s cultural imagination, evoking towns with slick little bars and poppy motels, rolling desert highways and coastal roads, fueled by rock and roll, traversed by iconic cars and snazzy new motorcycles. It popularized the entire notion of hopping in a car and just taking a drive to anywhere your heart and imagination could take you, and enjoying the landscape and people you met along the way.

It began to fall into decline in the 1950’s and 1960’s, when the Interstate Highway Act came into politics. Soon, there were a number of alternate roads, highways, and - yes - interstates that people could take to get where they wanted to go. There was no longer any need for the rambling, roaming Route 66 - not when there was typically a more direct way to get some place else. Soon, it was all about the destination, and not the journey.

There was an effort to revive some parts of the route in the 1980’s, and a number of highways were designated as places along the original Route 66, essentially securing as much of the original path for future enthusiasts like me and the other weirdos who like to wander out to obscure, far-flung places. For a time, the little towns on Route 66 were preserved - not expanding really, but they certainly weren’t dying out.

And then, the Crisis came.

It’s important to realize that even before the Crisis hit, the States were in a bad way socio-economically speaking. America saw several recessions and what is popularly called the Second Great Depression in the 2020’s and 2030’s, and a lot of the little Route 66 towns fell by the wayside even then. But the greatest killer of America’s most iconic Main Street was the Crisis. Several States - particularly in the Southwest - lost power, access to water and other supplies, and suffered from a massive drought brought on by the bombing and destruction of the central parts of California and sections of the Midwest. With the loss of the main avenues of agricultural resources, the U.S. government urged the abandonment of towns with populations smaller than 5000 people, and emergency evacuations into the larger cities were implemented.

It was at this time that La Cienega, a small community on the edge of Santa Fe, New Mexico, was abandoned, and with it, access to a large part of the original Route 66. With gas shortages throughout the country, it rapidly became necessary to encourage car-sharing, or even ditch the automobile all together. Bicycles became massively popular for navigating overcrowded cities, and soon, the U.S. government instituted emergency construction of the National Railway System, as a replacement for the massive destruction done to the Interstate Highway System. High-speed, solar- and battery-powered trains became the main way to transport people and supplies across the country, as transport ships were still highly militarized at that point.

And even though it’s been thirty years since the Crisis directly affected America, the reintroduction of cars back into society is a slow, uneven process. Many of the major automakers were wiped out and bankrupted during the Crisis, and the old seats of power at their factories were destroyed, both at home and abroad. The need for construction materials elsewhere in rebuilding cities and infrastructures was far more pressing than the need for constructing cars, and nowadays, a single train-bus-bicycle combo can get a person where they need to be much faster, much safer, and much more comfortably than the earlier automobile ever could. And sure, cars are still useful in the cities - car-sharing remains an easy, reliable way to save money and get from Point A to Point B in most places, but take a car outside the city? Without guaranteed gas or battery-charging stations? Risky business, indeed.

But the kicker is that with the loss of the automobile came the loss of America’s cultural landscape.
Yeah, okay, sure, you could see parts of historic Route 66 on the southwest transcontinental trains, but when you’re going 100 miles an hour on railways through the safest, most industrialized parts of the country, are you really seeing it?

Probably not.

See, the reason I decided on Deadlock Gorge is because, by all the Overwatch reports, the place is apparently pristine - we’re talking pre-2020 buildings, late 1990’s pavement, untouched sandstone canyons. And yes, I know that makes me sound weird, but when you’re a rolling stone adventurer like me, you’re interested in the weird, the uncanny, the “out there,” the forgotten places, unchanged by time. In fact, the newest thing in Deadlock Gorge is the North American Central Railway that runs from Chihuahua to El Paso to Grand Mesa to Buffalo to Saskatoon.

Point is, this place is old, a place outta time, a place outta the old historic Route 66 itself.

But as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, so I’ll just let my photos convince you:

An original Route 66 sign! I was thrilled to see it still standing with only superficial damage.
An old school gas station! Places of this nature just don’t even exist anymore, this is the kind of thing I’d like the Internet to get put on the National Historic Register.

Being there was unreal - I had thought that the Overwatch reports had described it well but this place was beyond words. The fact that the Panorama Diner sign is even still upright is nothing short of a miracle.
Alright, so let’s get down to the question I’m sure you all are dying for me to answer:

Did I run into Deadlock members?

The answer is: hell yeah I did.

And you know what? They were pretty alright.

I was privileged to get a drink at the High Side bar that the gang owns there, and the vast majority of them were good people - certainly, a little rough along the edges, but big at heart. Of course, when you enter places like this, it’s important to remember to be polite and not ask too many questions. Was I burning to know more about their run in with Overwatch? Of course. Did I want to ask about legendary outlaw Jesse McCree? Definitely. Was I dying to ride on one of their rocket bikes? Absolutely.

Did I ask any of those questions? Hell no I did not.

So if you’re here for the nitty-gritty, grimdark details of ex-convicts, drug dealers, and dangerous bikers, I’d suggest you go read up on Joel’s crime blog or dive into the declassified Overwatch reports, because you won’t find that here. Here, I’m all about exposing the scenery and putting it back into America’s cultural landscape.
So yeah, you can maybe see parts of Deadlock Gorge if you take the North American Central Railway, and maybe if you don’t blink at the right time. But if you want to access this kind of historic, beautiful place, the only way you’re getting there is by car, bike, or hiking, if you’re that kind of crazy.

I guess maybe you could try jumping off the train, but that’s a whole ‘nother brand of “crazy adventurer.”

So until my next rolling stone adventurer column, I’ll see you guys on the wilder side of life.

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S emáforo: Route 66 - Destroy the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:58 a.m. - in a train car above the gorge

As the train shudders and groans to a stop, Sombra feels every bone in her body rattle and shake and shiver loose a little, clattering together inside of her like coins in a purse. There’s the screaming and wailing of metal shredding to pieces as part of the bridge collapses, and the moaning and aching of train cars crashing into the ground, like secondary shocks of an earthquake. Despite being mentally prepared for it, she grips white-knuckled on the arm bars, curled in on herself like the nuns taught her to do in the event of an Omnic attack or air raid. She stays like that for a few seconds, breathing in the dust and smoke and what little shreds of air slip past her face. When she’s certain things have come to a stop, she opens her eyes.

Her train car is still over the gorge - she’s near the back of the train, the third car from the end, and she desperately averts her eyes from looking down, down into the maw of the earth. She takes another deep breath and rises on shaky legs, continuing to grip the bars on the back railing tight. There’s barely any room between her car and the one after it, just enough space for her to squeeze herself in between. She wedges her way along to the right, towards the western edge of the gorge, and peeks around to the north.
There’s a building clinging to the bluffs, its red, peeling roof nearly the same color as the cliffs surrounding it. As she watches, the doors closest to her slide open and a bunch of large, muscular, tattooed men and women burst out, rushing to the train cars that are crumpled on the ground before them. People come popping out of the center doors as well, and Sombra recognizes the large, mountain of a man in the center as Terry Hernandez, leader of Deadlock, and apparently carrier of a rocket launcher. The Deadlock gang dives into the crates and boxes littering the ground, and Sombra thinks she hears guns rattling off already.

Y ahora, la diversión comienza. (tn: and now the fun begins)

Sombra pulls a small device out of her bag, hefting it about in her hands a few times. She’s only played around with this in Dorado a few times, she hasn’t actually tested it in battle yet -

But if it works for Lena “Tracer” Oxton

It will work for her.

There is a small space, just beyond the railing of the center part of the diner, where she spies the northmost doors, unguarded and sheltered by the cliffs above them, the ledge below them, and the wreckage just to the east of them. She lines up her aim as well as she can -

Dios dame fuerza. (tn: god give me strength)

- and she hurls the device as hard as she can.

Sombra bites her lower lip as she watches it fall, fall, fall, and it clacks against the railing around the diner’s patio, and then tips over to the other side, just where she wants it.

She grins, snaps the command code in her biosystem, and fucking dissolves -

- only to rematerialize out of the translocator’s energy field a second later and whoo, the sudden motion and stop makes her feel a little dizzy. She leans back against the concrete ledge behind her when - like a fucking blur - someone rushes past her at top speed. Her eyes just barely manage to follow the massive red 76 emblazoned on his back as he tears into the north doors of the diner, enters into the hallway -

And immediately shouts something with a loud thud:

“JESUS FUCKING -” the soldier screams as someone else begins moaning and wailing and Sombra, invisibility still on, peaks around into the hallway. The soldier is sprawled at the top of the short set of stairs, barely keeping his fingers on that massive pulse rifle of his, as a...reddish...cloth...lump on the stairs wiggles around before unfolding itself a little, and oh.

It’s a person.

The soldier is twisting around on the tiled floor as Sombra steps into the doorway, grinning.

She cannot believe her plan actually fucking worked.

“Ah, bien, you made it in time, soldado,” she says to him casually, as if they’re old friends and she was expecting him over at her house for tea time. The once-dignified, once-gallant hero contorts himself around, hoisting the gun, as Sombra looks at the other person on the floor and qué chingados (tn: “what the fuck”)

It’s Jesse McCree.
His hat is slightly askew and his serape is flopping about uselessly on his shoulders and his hands appear to be handcuffed behind his back, but otherwise he looks to be in surprisingly okay shape considering every person in Deadlock wants to stuff him full of bullets. Sombra drops her invisibility, whistling slightly, “Well, well, a real life vaquero too. Just my lucky day. I could always use more bodyguards for this.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

The soldier is sitting up a little, aiming the rifle at her, his voice low and gravelly and sounding like shit, sounding like the ashes of the man he had once been. The cowboy, meanwhile, is squinting up at her, as if trying to assess if she’s actually real.

Behind her, a sniper rifle bangs off and a rocket blasts out.

Sombra grins at them cheerfully:

“Me llamo Sombra. ¿Qué tal, soldado y vaquero? You’re gonna help me destroy this bomb.”

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(Saqh): Route 66 - Stop the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:58 a.m. - in the train car above the Panorama Diner

Smoke and dust fill the metal train car as the whole thing rattles to a shaking, shuddering stop. Beside her, Saleh is coughing and hacking, and Fareeha herself is struggling to breathe calmly through her nose. Khalil is barking something at them and it takes a second for her brain to stop shaking around for her to process the words:

“Allright, team, you know the drill: Saleh, Tarq, you’re with Amari; Mahmud, Aizad, you’re with me! Remember, everyone, the jet jumps are far shorter and less powerful than you want them to be - use them with caution! There’s nothing worth risking your life or the lives of your comrades out there. Ready?”

“READY,” they shout back at him, and he pushes the side door open and -

“Oh, اللحيم (tn: oh hell),” Tarq swears behind her as they all stare out at the wreckage.

Their train car is the first one in the line that’s stable...relatively-speaking, anyways - there are two cars before theirs that are barely hanging on, the first one dangling precariously over the twisted, drooping metal, and the second one leaning and creaking on the curve. They’re positioned just over the edge of the southern cliff and the gorge itself, the ground plunging away hundreds of feet below the railings. There are train cars smashed into the road just off to the side of the gorge, and plumes of smoke and dust are rising up from the twisted, contorted metal. There’s shifting movement as -

“Look!” Saleh says, gesturing to the wreckage.

People - large, bulky men and women covered in leather and tattoos and carrying massive guns - are hauling the metal parts, smashing boxes open, prying things apart, when one of them shouts, and the others rush over and -

Their train car groans loudly and suddenly, there are flames erupting in the car immediately to their left.
“OUT!” Khalil is shouting, “EVERYBODY OUT! AIZAD, GET OKORO TO THE GROUND!”

“Sir!” Aizad replies, as Khalil launches himself into the air. Fareeha follows suit a second after, rocketing into the skies, feeling a tremendous relief to finally be out of the cramped, cluttered tin can of a train car and -

Something glints on the cliffs below her and reflexively, she lowers her propulsion, dropping a few feet as something whizzes right where her head was a second before.

“SNIPER,” she shouts, both aloud and over the comms, “EVERYBODY DOWN! GET TO COVER!”

Fareeha rockets back to the road, aiming for what she hopes is cover - there’s a slight sandstone ledge just south of the road, right before the sheer drop into the canyon, and she swoops in low, breathing a quick sigh of relief as her feet hit the ground. She ducks behind the ledge as Khalil and the others plop beside her. Khalil is shouting at them:

“Okoro, get to somewhere safe and hole up, I do not want you involved in this at all - I need you to keep our comms and systems up and running. Pharah, take your half and flank to the west, I want you on the other side of that wreckage - get as close as you can to those (tn: thieves) as possible, but be wary of getting too close. My team, we are gonna scope out those snipers and push them back, remember to weave in the air! You have space, those snipers do not!”

“Sir!” they all shout, but suddenly Okoro is saying loudly, “Captain, the Deadlock gang have acquired the package.”

“What?” Khalil demands, as they peer over the ledge out towards the wreckage -

The massive men - six, maybe even seven of them - are guiding something round, white, large, apparently extremely dense, already prepped on a hover carrier out of a train car and onto the road, and Fareeha feels her breath leave her as Mahmud gasps, “Is that a bomb??”

“And a big one,” Khalil mutters to her right, and Fareeha can practically imagine the anger on his face behind his visor, “خندة (tn: shit), these American military, not telling us what we were guarding, we were guarding a bomb the whole time - ”

“CAPTAIN,” Fareeha screams, as her eyes slide past him to the edge of the ledge just to the right of him -

Three individuals dressed in all grey - grey uniforms, grey body armor, grey tactical visors - and hefting sleek, black rifles have rounded the corner and are squaring up for them -

Talon.

Talon agents are here.

“GET BACK,” Fareeha hisses, snapping her wrist up and firing her concussive blast towards them. The mini-rocket hits them with a shock wave, and the three Talon agents are blown backwards several feet, with only one of them staying upright, the other two stumbling over themselves as it knocks them away.

“Thanks, Pharah, take the left, my team will clear these out!” Khalil says to her, before he jumps back into the air - staying close to the ground to avoid the snipers’ lines of sight. Aizad and Mahmud follow after him and, a beat later, Fareeha rushes off to the left, darting up to the open, sloping train car before her. A clanking of armored feet behind her tells her that Saleh, Tarq, and Okoro are
An ill-wish, Fareeha, her voice chides her, You should hope for the well-being of all in this mission.

It is hard to wish well upon the American soldiers when they did not tell us all of the truth.

The small group of four huddle up for a second, as Fareeha turns to Okoro, directing them, “When you find a safe spot, Okoro, be sure to let us know. Keep out of sight and lay low until this is over.”

“Affirmative, Lieutenant,” Okoro responds, before ducking back out into the glare of the sunlight and speeding off. Fareeha faces the other two, gesturing up the hollow train car, saying, “Let’s surprise them from above. We will hold off on rocket fire for now, we cannot risk detonating that bomb, switch to concussive rockets and bullets for now.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” they nod, and Fareeha takes a deep breath, before heading up the shaky, angled floor to the open light at the end of the car -

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Segador: Route 66 - Move the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:00 a.m. - the tunnel east of the Panorama Diner

“PULL BACK,” Reaper’s shouting at the three goons who got blasted the fuck back with a concussive rocket, “ASSHOLES, THOSE ARE HELIX MARK VI, IF THEY FIRE A REAL ROCKET YOU’RE FUCKING DEAD.”

Louis is, remarkably, the only one who stays on his feet, although now that they’re all wearing their visors it’s getting difficult to tell who’s who. The other two roll backwards, flipping over a few times before slamming into the cliff wall behind them. Reaper could fucking push both of them off the ledge and into the depths of the canyon with how annoyed he is at them, but that’s not important right now.

Three of the Helix fliers pop up from behind the rock ledge, hovering just a bit above the ground - low enough to get shelter again, but just high enough to give them a subtle height and maneuverability advantage over the Talon and Deadlock ground units. He hears Widowmaker and Henri fire off a few more rounds, but distant screams are the only reward for that - they’re aiming at the U.S. military soldiers who are stupidly rappelling down from the stable parts of the train still up on the tracks and making themselves easy targets.

“Widowmaker, Helix units, on the ground, below you!” Reaper growls out over the comms before he fucking dematerializes -

- and reforms himself directly behind the three Helix fliers.

God, that hurt like a FUCK.

He punches one of them in the back to make up for it.

FUCK THAT FUCKING HURT TOO
“Sir, behind us!” another Helix flier screams, before launching himself high into the air and god, that’s gonna make them a fucking bitch for the snipers to track. The sir - the one Reaper assumes is some sort of squad leader - says something in Arabic before his own propulsion generators kick in and he too shoots up high, beyond the reach of Reaper’s shotguns. The one that Reaper had hit shoots off to the left, just above where Widowmaker and Henri are sniping out and -

“WIDOWMAKER, ABOVE YOU,” he shouts into the comms as the three Stooges cluster back to him. On the bluff ledge above him, he sees her drop to her knees and Henri follows suit, disappearing behind the edge of the cliff.

“Do you need to bail?” Reaper snaps into the comms at them, rushing his group back to the east entrance of the tunnel. There are screams down from the road where the wreckage is, as bullets are being exchanged by both sides and a fucking ROCKET shoots up, from someone on the ground (Hernandez no doubt, that fuck) towards something in the air.

“No, no, not yet - we are getting to shelter,” Widowmaker’s voice crackles back, but he also hears her mutter, “Salauds, these ‘Elix guards, ‘Enri, this way!”

“The ground units are starting to touch down,” Reaper informs her as his team ducks back into the tunnel. He gestures at Inigo, who is limping a little, and Francesca cracks a biotic field for them, and a small ripple of relief ribbons through Reaper as Inigo breathes a little easier. He directs them, “We’re heading back out in a second to start on the U.S. military, looks like Hernandez is trying to take care of the other Helix units; we’re gonna help cover him. Everyone got that?”

“Yessir,” they drone back and Reaper snaps his face towards them, and though they can’t see his expression, he’s aware that they know he’s scowling, “I don’t know who the fuck trained you, but do NOT fucking rush in like you did earlier. Fuck, if that had been a real rocket, all three of you would be dead. We’re first going to that ledge the Helix assholes hid behind, and then we’re flanking up the south side, is that understood?”

“Yessir.”

“There’s gonna be three seconds where we cross the road without cover,” he explains, before pushing back into the comms, “Widowmaker, are you ready?”

“The ‘Elix guards ‘ave touched down by the gas station,” Widowmaker explains back, “‘Enri and I are returning to position, but we will have to move back soon - ‘Enri thinks they saw us in ‘ere.”

“Be careful,” Reaper cautions, “Tell us when you fall back.” He gestures to the team and then, taking a quick breath, darts back out into the sunlit street.

There’s gunshots on him almost immediately, but they miss wildly and the banging shots of returning sniper fire are a relief to hear as Widowmaker and Henri cover their run. He drops down behind the rock, crouching beneath the ledge as the other three drop in behind him, like ducklings following their mother, and he gives a tentative peek over the ledge to the next point they can run to. There are several train cars as part of the wreckage making a “natural” ramp and hiding holes of sorts and offering quick protection, but they’re at risk of those collapsing in on them. Beyond that, there are just boxes and crates scattering the site, but there’s really nothing else between the wreckage and the diner, and they cannot afford to be pushed back into the starting position.

Hernandez and his crew are shockingly managing to keep the other three Helix fliers back, firing off rockets at them as a subset of the crew guards the payload, moving the carrier up the winding street.
It will soon be out of the cover of the wreckage and out in the open until it rounds the corner of the cliff Widowmaker and Henri are on...and there are three other Helix fliers on the other side by the gas station.

Fucking.

Shit.

U.S. military soldiers are touching down from the train just to the west of Reaper’s group’s little southern ledge, but they haven’t noticed them yet -

“I’m going in there,” Reaper growls at his team, gesturing to the U.S. soldiers, “We cannot let them stop the payload’s momentum right now. If it stops now, we’re not gonna be able to secure it again. I’m going in for close range, you three fire on them from here and cover me - ”

“What if we hit you??” Inigo asks fearfully, and Reaper grumbles, “Well, first of all, FUCKING DON’T, but if you do...I’ll manage, just fucking shoot them, okay? We don’t need them dead, just incapacitated. They can’t do much if they can’t follow us into the Gorge. Got it?”

“Yessir!”

Reaper draws himself up to his full height -

- and then launches himself into the squad assembling itself.

“OH HOLY SHIT,” one of the soldiers manages to shout before a shotgun shell rips half of his face off. A second turns towards him but screams as a rifle shot pierces his side and he drops like a hot turd. The third and fourth are scrambling to lift their guns towards him, but Reaper swoops in close, puts a shotgun against each chest, and fires directly into their ribcages, their bodies blown back by the force of it. He ducks and weaves deftly as the fifth one attempts to hit him, shots whizzing by, but they cry out as rifle fire from the team behind him peppers into them, collapsing as their legs crumple. He rises from his bobbing to smash an elbow into the side of the sixth before placing the shotgun in his other hand against their neck and blasting their head off.

God, the recoil of the shotguns feels so good in his hands, up his arms, into his shoulders and back. They rumble with a contented, aching goodness, SEP chemicals and muscle memory and training and sheer fucking willpower keeping them moving, flowing, firing, dancing with a liquid, easy motion -

Just beyond this mess, a seventh one touches the ground and Reaper just moves in, levels his right shotgun at his stomach and punches a hole straight into their guts. A look of shock flutters onto their face, and then they tumble over, hardly making a sound as blood and intestines spill out.

Reaper draws up the soul globe from the sixth one, the one closest to him, and sucks the energy of life and death, vida y muerte, into his soul and he breathes a little easier as the pain and heat in his body lessens.

To his right, the payload carrier is rounding up into the first curve of the street, just under the platform that connects to the upper tunnel and ramp. He glances up, and sees Widowmaker and Henri fire off a few rounds before they duck back into the tunnel, and he rushes back to his ground team.

“Widowmaker: status,” he speaks into the comms, as the goons flock up around him. They continue eastward up the sandstone ledge until they peek out on the east side of it, looking in at the gas station as the payload chugs up under the overhead platform.
“We will need to pull back,” she informs him, and he watches as the other three Helix fliers reappear in the sky over the gas station, “Or they will pin us down in this tunnel.”

“My team will cover the gas station and prepare for them when they’re grounded,” Reaper explains, “But we’re gonna get more ground units coming out of the train soon. And we gotta rush if we wanna get this past the first gate before the backup arrives.”

“Oui, we will cover some more of the American ground soldiers, where is Hernandez?” she asks, and he sees her peek out of the east side of the upper tunnel in his upper left peripherals.

“He’s here with the payload, I think some of his guys are barely managing to keep those other Helix units off of him, so he could use some covering sniper fire,” Reaper mutters and gestures to his team that they’re gonna go around the backside of the gas station, behind the giant billboard to their right.

“Tsk, there is far too much for we to do - ”

“Us,” he corrects her, and she stutters, “Quoi?”

“There is far too much for US to do - ”

“THIS IS NO TIME FOR ENGLISH BULLSHIT,” she snaps over the comms and he sees the Talon agents with him wither a little under the shriek of it in their ears. Reaper shrugs, mainly to himself as he begins to move up the right, behind the billboard, and towards the back of the gas station.

He could explain it in Spanish too.

But she wouldn’t understand that either.

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Sharpshooter: Route 66 - Destroy the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 8:59 a.m. - inside the north staircase of the Panorama Diner

Jesse’s squintin’ against the harsh, blazing light from just beyond the doors, tryin’ to make out if this bright, cyber-punk...fairy...Latina woman is real or some sort of fucked up fever dream. Him and the other guy - the dude in the half-face mask - are still sittin’ on the floor, although technically Jesse is still lyin’ on the floor, undignified, sure, but still...and they’re both ogling her like she’s lost her damn mind because she had just declared they were gonna help her-

And he quotes:

“Destroy this bomb.”

Okay, partner, step numero uno: there’s a bomb.

Cool. Real fuckin’ dandy.

No wonder Terry had been in such a mad dash to blow the tracks - the man loved his weapons and armaments, but he loved explosive weapons and armaments above all else. He musta been tickled pink-peach over the thought of gettin’ his grubby hands on this one - if Jesse’s readin’ the wind right, the dude who had fuckin’ tripped over him is a soldier, that train car out front’s got the U.S. military’s standard star design on it, and there’s bullets and shoutin’ already dustin’ the air outside.
Step numero dos: it’s a U.S. military bomb.

Now, why the fuck this particular soldado wanted to help the cyberpunk fairy lady destroy it was another question entirely, but Jesse’s mind and body are churnin’ over other things right now. His stomach is still bellyachin’ over the soldier’s rough kick, and his eyes are still stingin’ a little from the earlier flashbang, but he’s wiggin’ his arms as subtly as he can beneath the cover of his serape, attemptin’ to maneuver his normal hand up a ways to the button that unlocks the secret compartment in his prosthetic.

Step numero tres: get the fuckin’ handcuffs off.

“...Did ya just call yerself ‘shadow?’” Jesse drawls out against the tiles of the steps he’s laying on, pretending like that’s the part of the conversation he’s fixated on. Really though, he’s buyin’ time to get these handcuffs off. His fingers find the switch -

“I assume it’s a codename,” the other man, an American...Midwest accent, maybe? Hard to tell, they’re all so bland when they’re from Ohio or Illinois or wherever - Jesse’s fingers flick the button and the small door to the compartment slides open.

“El soldado está correcto, it’s a nickname,” the woman - Sombra - replies happily with a small flourish of her hand, “It’s not like anyone cares about my real name anyways, and Sombra is just...so much more badass, sí?”

The soldier behind him shrugs, and Jesse just kinda mumbles something about wishin’ how he got a cool codename, when, shockingly -

Sombra bends down and helps prop him into a sitting position.

He jolts a little at the touch of her slight fingers, but she doesn’t even seem to notice, saying to him cordially, “You got yourself in a real situation here, vaquero.”

He feels the small lockpick drop into his normal fingers.

“Yeah, well, they dun blindsided me and then cuffed me, and then threw me on the floor and that was when an explosion happened?” Jesse sighs, quietly snapping the pick into the small pinhole of the handcuffs, and the masked soldier props himself up more too, eyeing both of them warily, rifle never leaving his hands and his aim never shifting off the woman. Jesse continues seemingly without care, rambling, “I’m ‘fraid I’m a bit lost on the rodeo that’s goin’ on ‘round here, what’s this I hear ‘bout a bomb?”

“The United States military was transporting a special new bomb on that train,” Sombra answers him easily, and Jesse’s grateful that she’s so forthcomin’ with that handy bit of info, though he had managed to piece some of it together.

That said, that don’ make him stomach the situation any easier.

“...They dun transported a new bomb by train?” Jesse asks, feeling the lockpick switch some of the pins in the cuffs, “Are they fuckin’ dumbasses?”

“Yeah,” the soldier decides to join in, voice gruff and firm and...irritatingly familiar but Jesse don’ know why and at the moment, he don’t care much. The soldier pulls himself up, sighing, “They certainly are.” Sombra looks up at the soldier and gives him a wicked grin and the soldier continues to aim his rifle at her when -

“TA-DA,” Jesse declares loudly, jumping up with a flourish of his arms as the handcuffs fall off of
him and Sombra is jerking back, swearing something in Spanish, and the soldier is snapping the rifle in Jesse’s direction, but the cowboy literally just grabs Sombra by her collar and hoists her in the air before she can get away.

Aw, she’s kinda cute like this.

Like a kitty that he’s pulled outta the river.

“PENDEJO, PUT ME THE FUCK DOWN,” she’s hissing and flailing angrily, taking swipes at him, but he holds her out at arm’s length, chuckling at her, “Missy, you outta know that every good bandito can get out of handcuffs.”

“You would have a fucking lockpick in that damn secret compartment,” the soldier mutters, just barely lowering the rifle a tad.

Huh.

Well ain’t that somethin’.

Sombra actually stops pinwheeling her arms at him, and for a brief, sunshiny moment, Jesse shares a skeptical squint with her. His eyes narrow and her eyes narrow and they share a glance at each other before they both shift their gaze back to the soldier, who jerks back reflexively a bit. Now that Jesse can see him a bit more in fully, he recognizes him better - he’s the one they’re calling Soldier: 76 in the news, the man with a makeshift tactical visor and a leather jacket with 76 in bold, bright numbers on the back.

Also Jack Morrison’s fucking heavy pulse rifle.

Which he stole.

Now, “Overwatch Strike-Commander Jack Morrison” meant a lotta things to a lotta people, but to Jesse, Jack had been a warm, welcomin’ smile after long, damn dangerous missions; he had been a reassurin’ hand on Jesse’s back during tough times; he had been a sly smile and a wink when he would give Jesse a bottle of American whiskey behind Gabriel’s back when Jack came back from the States, or a packet of Swiss chocolate when he returned from the Geneva base; he had been a clear, strong voice that would join in on nights when Jesse and Gabriel - when they weren’t exhausted and aching from some mission - would bust out their guitars and play a few songs.

He had been the heart of Overwatch, and then some.

To Jesse –

He’d been like a father.

And this fuckin’ asshole had the nerve to steal Jack’s property.

Jesse eyes the weapon in the soldier’s hands, chewing slightly on his lip in lieu of a cigar. He’s real regrettin’ droppin’ Peacekeeper in that dust outside, he’d prolly pop a bullet in this fucker’s chest and be done with it - he don’ like this asshole’s business none. Stealing from Watchpoints - even ones that are no longer active - don’t endear him much to Jesse.

However, if the pendejo is gonna fight Deadlock

Then Jesse ain’t gonna be too picky about it.
“Well, shit, partner,” Jesse asks with a low, dangerous hum to his voice, “How the fuck’d you know that one?”

“I’ve done my homework on...people like you,” 76 replies reluctantly, and Jesse’s pretty sure that ain’t the truth. Lies don’t come easy to Jesse like they do to some other people, but readin’ lies, well...he’s pretty alright at that.

“Es eso así?” Jesse mutters, but Sombra just glances back and forth between him and the soldier with an inscrutable expression on her face. She’s still just dangling in the air as Jesse holds her there, before she finally sighs, reaches into her jacket pocket and pulls out -

A fucking automatic machine pistol, holy fuck.

A few things happen in the span of a few fractions of a second:

The soldier raises the rifle towards her, hollerin’, “JESSE,” at the top of his smoke-and-whiskey-filled lungs.

Sombra gives Jesse a wicked grin.

Jesse gulps a little in semi-real fear.

Jesse’s other hand instinctively pulls a flashbang from his belt, beneath the cover of his serape.

He does not throw it though.

He just waits a fraction of a second longer.

Because while Jesse’s got a real knack for walkin’ into trouble,

He’s also got a real knack for havin’ the patience to get himself outta it.

“Bien, fuckers, I did not want to do this, but put me the fuck down and podemos hablar, ¿no? I need help, and you two cabrones certainly aren’t going to be able to do shit on your own, so let’s figure out a plan because none of us here want either side to succeed, de verdad?” she snaps at both of them. The faint smile fully slides off of Jesse’s face, and he gives a more serious glance at 76 before slowly setting her back on her feet. She lands lithely, adjusting her jacket with some annoyance until it’s settled back on her slim frame just the way she likes it.

Jesse’s hand pops the flashbang back in its holster.

Not right now, he thinks to himself. Maybe later, but let’s get more intel first.

But numero uno: ham it the fuck up.

He folds his arms in mock frustration, muttering sourly, “Fer the record, I ain’t trusting either of ya.”

“What a coincidence,” 76 says dryly, dropping his rifle a bit more, “I feel the same way.”

“Trust, no trust, no está importante. We all want the same thing here,” Sombra says, settling her right hand - machine pistol still in it - on her hip and the other -

The other taps on several bright pink buttons in mid-air as the biopanels on her head glow faintly.

“WHAT THE FUCK,” Jesse shouts, pulling aside a bit as 76 also moves back, but several images of blueprints and a crude overhead map of what he believes is Deadlock Gorge appears on the
projection. Sombra rolls her eyes, gesturing with a lazy flick of her hand, “Relajate, amigos, it’s just a projection. Dios, you would think neither of you have seen biotech before.” She beckons them closer and after he shares a quick glance with that...red screensglass panel the soldier uses for eyes, Jesse steps forward, still eyeing her (and him) warily. The soldier follows a beat later, moving in to (apparently) look at images.

“This is the bomb here. To bring Jesse up to speed, this bomb is bad news,” she says, pointing to one of the blueprints. Jesse squints at it, reading the fine print before muttering in shock, “A fuckin’ heavy-grade fusion bomb? Are they insane??”

“Yeah, and they decided to transport it by train,” 76 snorts, and Jesse shakes his head in disbelief, saying, “It’s like they wanted it to get stolen.”

“Hmm, well, that’s a possibility,” Sombra says with a sly smile, pulling up the map of the road winding up through this segment of the gorge. Jesse can see that it’s pretty rough (he could prolly still walk this Gorge blindfolded if he had to), but he spots the diner where they’re currently situated in a heartbeat.

Outside, there are screams and the rattling of gunfire and rockets being shot at each other.

Sombra continues as if she doesn’t hear any of it.

“So baaaaasically, none of us here like the Deadlock Gang, right? And we reeeeeeally don’t want to see this bomb for sale on the black market, because that’s all sorts of bad news. This thing has the power to make another Australia and no one wants to risk that,” she says, her voice growing more solemn with each word.

Jesús, Maria, y José, qué chingados.

Jesse tugs his hat off his head and runs his normal hand through his wild, overgrown hair, mumbling, “Jesús, Maria, y José, qué chingados.”

“Pero, none of us here like the U.S. military either, and I think we can all agree that we really don’t want to see them succeed with this bomb, right?”
“Damn straight,” 76 grumbles, “They shouldn’t be rewarded for their stupidity and recklessness here.”

“So!” Sombra says happily, seeing as both of them “agree” with her, “We destroy the bomb, ¿no?”

“Yeah, y’all haven’t actually described how y’all wanna do that,” Jesse says, scratching at his head before placing his hat back on, “I dun know ‘bout y’all but I don’ really wanna be caught in a fuckin’ fusion explosion today.”

“We’re not detonating it,” Sombra sighs with another roll of her eyes and, with a flourish of her hand, another image appears. This time, it’s an image of a small device, about the size of a baseball, and Jesse can see the words Electromagnetic Pulse Bomb at the bottom.

“...An EMP,” the soldier says slowly, and Sombra points a long finger at him, winking, “Bingo! I’ve got a bunch of small-sized EMPs ready to go. We’re gonna damage the circuits inside it and put it out of commission.”

“Couldn’t they just...fix that? Later?” Jesse asks curiously. He ain’t a scientist and he barely knows shit about bombs, but it seems like a relatively...straightforward fix. Just swap out the circuits and semiconductors and blam, the bomb is good as new.

Sombra grins, “Not if they don’t know.”

“...You want us to stealth an EMP bomb...on that fucking fusion bomb...the bomb two sides are literally waging a battle to get...without either side seeing us do it?” 76 asks in dumbfounded disbelief. Jesse is frowning at the absurdity of it as well.

Because it sounds

Fuckin’ impossible.

Also fucking dangerous.

And above all else, really fuckin’ troublesome.

Sombra shrugs, “I can turn invisible and translocate.”

“Eso está pinche bien, hermana,” 76 snarls, and Jesse notes that despite his bland, gravelly-sounding Midwest accent, the man has impeccable Spanish. The soldier continues on blithely, “In case you missed it, the cowboy and I can’t do either of those things and we sure as shit can’t take down two fucking armies by ourselves.”

“You won’t have to, we’re gonna let them kill each other off and swoop in when things get low. Trust me, the Helix Raptora squad is going to destroy Hernandez’ crew and when that happens, we pick off the survivors, blow the EMP, and then leave it for whoever wants it,” Somba nods confidently and Jesse frowns, mainly to himself.

He sure fuckin’ walked into the shit now.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, missy, but that seems...awful unrealistic,” Jesse says to her, pulling out his case from a pocket by his flashbangs. The soldier grumbles, adding on, “Not just unrealistic - fucking ludicrous. What if one side gains a clear advantage? Are we just going to let them win?”

“Well, that’s where you two come in!” Sombra says cheerfully, smiling brightly and oh, shit, Jesse don’ like the looks of that.
He pulls a cigar out of the case and pockets it, popping the cigar in his mouth and -

“...You’re still smoking those things?” the soldier asks, appalled. Jesse squints again because, again, there’s that strange, unnervin’ sensation of -

“...Man’s gotta have his comforts,” Jesse mutters, pullin’ a lighter out and flicking the flame over the end of the cigar. It takes a second for the clipped end to burn, and he pulls in a deep, satisfying drag that fills his lungs with cancer and his heart with a li’l bit of contentment. When he exhales, he glares at the other man, wonderin’ aloud, “Y’all got a problem if I smoke?”

“I - uh...no,” the soldier stammers awkwardly, but Sombra -

Sombra is just watching them with keen amusement and a soft smirk.

“...Seems like you got a real personal interest in my habits, partner,” Jesse says, chewing a little on the end of the cigar, savoring the deep, smoky flavor that warms his mouth, “Think I might recognize you if you took yer Cyclops mask off?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the soldier scoffs at him, before turning his attention back to Sombra, “I am not rushing the front lines for some...punk I’ve just met.”

“Ooooh, that’s a real zinger there, pops,” Jesse snarks, but he’s got a wry smile on his face, and between him and Sombra, it’s kinda feelin’ like two cats playin’ with a mouse they cornered.

A very dangerous, heavy-pulse-rifle-wieldin’ mouse, but still a mouse.

“Go easy on him,” Sombra chides Jesse, but her eyes are still aglow with mischief, “He doesn’t know what he wants yet. Oye, soldado;” she says with a small flourish of her empty hand, looking back to the soldier, “Think about it - we don’t have to take the front lines for very long. Tell you what - I’ll even let you call when we push in, yes? You’re the one with the big gun, you should be in charge.”

Now, the mask don’t change expression, but Jesse fucking feels the soldier tense up at that.

“...No,” he mutters sharply, as if rejecting his own ideas rather than hers, “I’m not going to help.”

Sombra’s expression drops a little, but she rolls her head and waves her pistol a bit in a relaxed, easy manner, muttering, “Okay, well, guess you’ll never know what I have to offer.”

At this, the soldier perks up again, but he hesitates, so Jesse steps in, muttering, “Alright, the old soldier here ain’t gonna do it, so I’ll bite instead: whatcha got to offer us, hermana.”

Sombra flashes a wicked grin at them, and suddenly a new picture appears on her holo-projection:

An image of Watchpoint: Geneva.

The Swiss Base.

Both the soldier and Jesse stop moving.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of Angela, standing before the United Nations council.

Jesse’s eyes linger over her small frame, the sag of her shoulders, the deep bags beneath her eyes.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of a security feed, angled down on a sharp, angular figure, lean and lithe and dangerous - Genji - amid tall shining buildings.
The image flickers, changing to a picture of a strange, cybernetic headgear, the paneling smooth and sleek, black on blue, a sniper rifle resting on the person’s shoulder.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of a giant white bomb being constructed, the LumériCo logo bold in the background of the facility.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of Watchpoint: Gibraltar, dark and dim, except that a single light is on in one of the comms towers.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of a gigantic mech being built, as a dark haired woman watches from the railing above it.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of another security feed, looking down on a hooded figure dressed in a long black overcoat as he stands amid numerous bodies on the floor.

The image flickers, changing to a picture of a phone camera, being held at an awkward angle down the aisle of a train, a tall, serape-wrapped figure pointing a revolver down the train car.

Jesse feels the color rising to his cheeks a little as the soldier snorts.

The soldier’s mood stops at the next picture though.

Because the image flickers, changing to a picture of him, flipping off the security camera, holding the heavy pulse rifle in his other hand.

“Ofrezco la verdad. (tn: I offer the truth)” Sombra’s voice is sweet like honey, but sinister like the dark, and for a moment, Jesse thinks he sees a skull flash across her face, angular and sharp and decorated like sugar. She tilts her head, still grinning at them, murmuring, “Wouldn’t you like to know the truth?”

Beside him, the soldier stiffens, and then -

“...How detailed is that map of yours?” he asks her, and like the Cheshire Cat -

Her victorious grin practically glows neon in the half-lighting of the diner.

Jesse rolls his eyes at how easily she got her prey.

He’s gonna be a tougher raccoon to catch.

...Or so he hopes.

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Confused what I thought with something I felt
Confuse what I feel with something that's real
I tried to sell my soul last night
Funny, he wouldn't even take a bite

Far away
I heard him say (come with me now)

Don't delay

I heard him say (come with me now)

Chapter End Notes

Does it feel like playing the game?
Chapter Summary

The Payload approaches a checkpoint - but will it get there in time?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Overwatch: Route 66 - The Payload is Approaching the Checkpoint

Far away

I heard him say (come with me now)

Don’t delay

I heard him say (come with me now)

Whoa come with me now

I’m gonna take you down

Whoa come with me now

I’m gonna show you how

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( Saqh): Route 66 - Stop the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:02 a.m. - just above the train car wreckage

It becomes apparent almost immediately that Fareeha’s team is vastly underpowered.

This is due to two main things: Fareeha does not want to risk setting off the bomb, and so she has commanded her team to restrict their rocket use to only when away from the payload. A common sense practice, she thought when she had first given the order, but it seems that others did not feel the same.

Because the second issue is that the Deadlock gang on the ground has zero qualms abouting using rocket launchers so close to a massive explosive.
“KEEP MOVING,” Fareeha shouts to Saleh and Tarq, her teeth rattling as her propulsion thrusters flare into quaking life, boosting her back up a few feet in the air and helping her narrowly miss the rocket that skitters by her. She points her wrist towards the Deadlock members clustering on the ground, sending off another concussion rocket and knocking several of them back a few feet.

It’s something -

But it’s not enough.

Despite their best efforts, the carrier with the bomb on it has already managed to crawl up the street, rounding the cliff corner and steadily disappearing from her view. Somehow, it feels like there’s no end to the numbers of Deadlock members crawling about on the ground, because even though she sprays bullets - both rubber and metal - at them, there always seem to be more. The gang has split into two: one group is escorting the bomb to...wherever they’re planning on taking it, and the other -

This is a distraction group, Fareeha thinks, gritting her teeth as she soars past the cluster of gang members again, peppering them with more rubber bullets from an accessory barrel on her rocket launcher. Its main feature, of course, was to fire rockets, but Khalil had considered it imperative to cover other possible ammo types, specifically for these kinds of situations.

“There are times you want heavy fire power,” he had explained to his squad when they had received the accessory barrels, “But there will be times when you may need a lighter touch.”

This, though.

This was not one of those times.

We need to regroup, Fareeha considers, before realizing it’s true. Under normal circumstances, three Helix Mark VI pilots could easily take care of this kind of situation, but with their constraints in place, they were only struggling to stay afloat.

“THE BOMB HAS MOVED,” Fareeha shouts back to her team, “ROCKETS NOW, AND THEN HEAD TO THAT UPPER TUNNEL.”

“Yes Ma’am,” they yell back, and Fareeha clicks a switch on her launcher, flipping it back into “heavy-duty” mode. The smoke and dust from the wreckage makes her eyes water a bit, but her visor helps clear her vision, and she takes a (not very well-aimed) shot at the distraction group, rocket whistling out of her launcher with a powerful oomph to her shoulder. It smashes into the group with a surprising pop and Fareeha winces a little at the screams that reach her ears, but they are quickly replaced with several more small explosions from Saleh’s and Tarq’s rockets.

She does not have much time to consider it, though, as the fuel gauge on her visor is dipping into the red. She shoots herself towards the upper tunnel on the cliffs east to the diner, and releases the pressure on the throttle, gliding herself to the rough stone ramp, armored feet clattering as she touches down just past the train car resting there. A fraction of a second later, she hears her comrades follow her, their armor clanking as all three of them rush into the cool darkness of the tunnel.

“Pause,” she states to them and they all relax for a short second, breathing in the shadowy fresh air, crisp and clean compared to the sooty, ashy atmosphere by the wreck. Fareeha inhales-exhales a few times, carefully watching the fuel gauge fill itself back up as the cold fusion batteries refill the propulsion thrusters. Just before hers is completely full, she glances at the other two, explaining, “We need to regroup with Captain Khalil’s team - bullets mean little if they can just scatter us with rockets. The six of us should be strong enough to push the ones guarding the carrier back. Is that clear?”
“Yes ma’am,” they state, though Tarq is still gasping for breath a little. Fareeha jerks her hand down into the tunnel, and the three of them rush down it. It’s not long, but is surprisingly winding for being all of 3 meters in length, and when she peeks her head out of the eastern opening, she’s mildly surprised to see that they’re further north than she anticipated - just past the north wall of the...gas station, she figures, reading the signage on the crumbling, rotting building. The carrier with the bomb is moving up to the the west of the gas station - just slightly south of her team’s position - relatively unencumbered, and Fareeha scowls a little to herself.

Where are the American soldiers? There had been plenty of them on the train, and yet she has hardly seen any - and here, on the other side of the cliff, the Deadlock gang is moving forward with a surprising amount of ease. Having ground units flank them from the wreckage site and pinning the gang in would be extremely helpful for her team - perhaps they could finish this in one fell swoop if the American soldiers were fast enough -

Something soars into the air from up behind the gas station, and her attention jerks upward. She recognizes Khalil’s armor, and a fraction of a second later, Aizad and Mahmud follow, their own Mark VI’s glinting in the sunlight. Fareeha raises her hand to give the motion to follow them into the air when -

There’s the crack of a sniper rifle shot just to her left - to the north, and Fareeha jerks back reflexively, her and the other two ducking back into the shelter of the tunnel as her eyes scan the ledge to the north of them. There are several columns of rock and clinging scrub that somehow manage to block much of her view of the sniper(s?) but she watches another bullet shoot out from behind the minimalist cover, following the slight trail of smoke as it rips through the air -

A shout pierces the skies, and her eyes quickly flip back over to above the gas station, where Aizad -

Aizad is falling.

The jet jumpers will get them safely up to twenty meters if used to propel the pilot directly vertical, and a fall from that distance would likely be fatal in most circumstances. However, Fareeha knows from both training and experience that no one on the team really ever reaches the full height, often weaving and floating in the air around twelve to sixteen meters.

Even so, and even covered in the protective armor -

A fall like this could kill him.

If the sniper shot didn’t.

In retrospect, what she did next was foolish, but she would probably have made the same choice anyways.

Fareeha launches herself sideways into the air, out of the cover of the tunnel, positioning herself above the northwestern corner of this stretch of the road, and just south of the sniper’s placement. For a fraction of a second, she very briefly - so briefly, locks her eyes on a tall, thin feminine figure and a shorter, lean masculine one before she tilts her launcher in their direction -

She sees the woman’s golden eyes widen in shock -

She looks kind of familiar - is the random stray thought that runs through Fareeha’s overclocked brain -

And then she fires.
Soliste: Route 66 - Move the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:03 a.m. - on the ledge northwest of the gas station

Widowmaker does not think.

She merely reacts.

She snaps her free, left hand out, wrapping it around Henri’s chest in a flash while simultaneously pressing the button on her arm guard. The claw end of the grapple shoots out and for a moment, she thinks –

she fears -

That it will not latch on in time.

But it drives itself into the cliff stone about eight meters away and recoils, yanking her and Henri westward bodily, across the downward slope of the ledge they’re on, rushing them past the north billboard in a fraction of a second, just as the rocket crashes into the exact spot they had been in - she feels the heat and pressure roll onto her back in waves, and hisses slightly as it singes her cold skin.

The two of them come crashing into the cliff wall, Henri slamming against it first with a loud, meaty thud, and Widowmaker smacking into his back. He reels for a second, arguably having gotten the worse of the two situations, but her familiarity with the grapple and the frequency with which she uses it helps temper her shock to it, and she’s pressing the release button in the same moment she’s crashing into him. Despite the rattling in her head, she’s snapping herself around towards the Helix flier, who’s hovering just above where they once were, and she swears the two of them lock eyes (though it is hard to tell with that golden visor on the flier’s face).

I think I know her.

She does not know why she thinks this.

But the thought passes quickly as it comes and before she even has fully processed the words, she’s grabbing Henri and rushing the two of them towards the east side of this little cliff area, just past the gas station. There are ramps and planks and more of the natural cliff rising above that space, and all her instincts are honing in on is “get to cover, get to cover.”

As they’re dashing south across the road -

The Helix flier she shot smashes into the ground ahead of her.

Widowmaker barely flinches as his body hits the ground with a sickening crunch, her eyes are still laser-focused on getting as much distance and coverage between her and the Helix fliers as possible, sprinting as fast as her long legs can push themselves while also dragging the semi-stunned Henri behind her. There are more blasts and a smattering of bullets just on their heels as the other two Helix fliers who had been part of the trio with the fallen on lower themselves between her and the more southern “cover” she’s aiming for, shouting something at them and at their downed comrade. She pulls herself and Henri behind the eastern wall of the diner as the two Helix fliers aim their launchers at them, and she thinks -

she fears -
That she has just pinned herself and Henri against the wall for a rocket-launcher firing squad when -

A spray of rifle fire shoots at the two Helix fliers from the south of the diner.

The two of them launch back, soaring up high into the air and Widowmaker again, seemingly without pause, continues moving forward - moving south, getting under the cover of the ramps and walkways and into the more sheltered space by the southeast corner of the diner as -

“YOU ALRIGHT?”

Reaper emerges into the space from her right, growling at the two of them in his chalky, broken voice as the three other Talon agents flank out slightly to cover them. Widowmaker nods, the breathlessness of rushing almost thirty meters at full sprint while hauling another person finally catching up to her.

“O-oui,” she gasps, her lungs seizing and tensing as they struggle to get more air, and Reaper makes a gesture to one of the other agents, who silently moves in and cracks a biotic field vial for them. Widowmaker feels her lungs relax and the stinging burns on her back smooth out, and Henri’s head snaps forward with a little more alertness.

“Did you kill him?” Reaper asks glancing at the downer Helix flier, and Widowmaker shakes her head, mumbling between breaths, “No - I - I just - grazed ‘is shoulder.”

“Knocked out a thruster?”

“I - I believe - I did.”

“Good work,” Reaper mutters, and the mildly pleased tone to his voice shocks her a little. He moves in that strange, semi-gliding way past her, and the other three Talon agents move after him, and he snaps back to her, “The other two will land soon, we’re moving in - head up the eastern ledge to the gate when you two are ready.”

“Understood,” she gasps, and Henri nods a bit, mainly to himself. She glances at the ramp to the south, her eyes tracing how it runs up the cliff to the northeast, and shift her sniper rifle in her hands.

Soon, they will be pushing for the gate.

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Semáforo: Route 66 - Destroy the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:01 a.m. - inside the north hallway of the Panorama Diner

The three of them cluster by the doorframe, with the soldier taking point. He tilts his head out, scanning the immediate vicinity, and Sombra watches as three Helix fliers dance about in the skies, narrowly avoiding the rockets that Hernandez’s crew members are launching up at them.

She’s not exactly sure how he can see much of anything really - a large part of their view is blocked by the fallen train cars. They could head to the right and swoop up from the south, but that would put them right where the U.S. soldiers are rappelling down (many of them now on the west side of the steel railing, having wised up when snipers shot down the people rappelling on the east side) and probably get themselves caught in the crossfire between the Deadlock gang and the soldiers.
Suddenly, one of the Helix fliers launches a rocket at the crew on the ground, hidden just out of their sight by the train cars, and Sombra hears several screams and then several more rocket blasts and -

“NOW,” the soldier yells, and the three of them dart forward, practically scraping themselves along the train car blocking the road’s tunnel and up towards the train cars that have landed on some sort of cliffside ramp and -

Jesse rolls across the ground and then snaps himself back up in one swift movement, hollering cheerfully to himself as he hoists his revolver in the air and -

Suddenly there are Deadlock members stumbling backwards into the space between them and the “ramp” of train cars they’re rushing towards.

The soldier does not even flinch, does not even hesitate. He swings the butt of his massive pulse rifle clear across the first guy’s face with a loud, crunchy snap, and the guy’s head twists at an awkward angle and mierda, Sombra thinks he might be dead just from the hit alone. There’s a pop from Jesse’s revolver to her left and another Deadlock member drops to their knees before slumping face-down into the road. The soldier, being faster and a split-second ahead of the two of them, sticks the barrel of his rifle directly against the third man’s chest and fires, and his body shudders and stumbles backwards with a few autonomous-nervous-system steps before it too falls -

The three of them round the sharp turn into the hollow of the train car, Jesse wheezing slightly as they pause briefly for some air in the cover.

“...You know, if you didn’t smoke, you’d have the lungs to run those fifteen meters like a normal human being,” the soldado tells the vaquero disdainfully, and Jesse opens his mouth to respond but instead just doubles over a little bit more, placing a hand to his side.

“I dun...need...yer sass,” the cowboy chokes out and Sombra just snorts at him.

“No, what you need is to quit smoking,” the soldier sighs, before jerking his head towards the upper end of the train cars. Jesse manages to straighten himself back up, but a small wince of pain flashes on his face before they semi-walk, semi-jog up to the sunlit end.

“Did you pick up your gun back there?” Sombra asks the cowboy as he huffs and puffs alongside her. Jesse somehow manages to give her a sly grin, even with the cigar still wedged in between his teeth, muttering, “Hell yeah I did, hermana - dropped it when Hernandez and the boys flashbanged me and got them cuffs on my wrists, but I always fine my way back to ol’ Peacekeeper - ”

Without warning, the soldier jerks his left hand out in front of them, basically blocking them from moving and before Sombra can snap at him -

The three Helix fliers touch down on the stone ledge just outside of the train car’s opening, a mere meter and half away.

Sombra thinks she stops breathing.

She nearly snaps on her cloaking out of instinct, but resists as the soldier pulls his left hand back, placing his index finger against what she assumes is the mouth part of his visor, before he shakes his head.

Sí, sí, ella sabe - no palabras ahora. (tn: yes, yes, she knows - no words now)

The three Helix fliers don’t even glance in their direction before they dart up a ways and into a tunnel on their left, disappearing into the cliff.
Sombra breathes a little, but the soldier is turning to her almost immediately, whispering, “Cloak yourself, follow them, make sure we don’t walk straight into danger and report back.”

She rolls her eyes at how…stiffly he’s handling all of this, but she guesses that old habits don’t fade so quickly. She snaps her cloaking on and revels in the small gasp of shock it gets out of Jesse, before darting up out into the sunlight and -

Oh god, the carrier has rounded the corner of the cliff and is making its way north, just west of the gas station. Sombra very briefly glances back at the wreckage and -

Oh, mierda.

The U.S. soldiers have grouped up

And are gunning down the part of Hernandez’s crew that had stayed behind to distract the Helix fliers.

Backup is already coming and coming in HOT.

Sombra ducks into the tunnel and she sidles herself along the winding cave walls until -

There are some sniper shots in the distance and she watches as the three Helix fliers flit back into the shelter of the tunnel, before they peer back out and -

Another sniper shot…

And a distant scream.

Suddenly, one of the Helix fliers bolts out of the tunnel and launches into the air, and after a split second, the other two follow, also rising and readying their rocket barrels. Sombra dances right up to the edge of the tunnel’s frame, her eyes scanning for -

A different Helix flier is falling through the air nearly twenty meters to the east, they’re going to crash land behind the gas station -

Two other Helix fliers are diving after them -

The three Helix fliers she was following are hovering in the air just slightly north of the tunnel’s entrance, and the first one is firing a rocket at -

Two figures fucking rip themselves out from cover behind some sandstone columns as a grapple yanks them eastward along the northern cliff, and without missing a beat, the two of them are darting south across the road, seemingly rushing for cover behind the gas station and -

Oh.

...OH.

¡La araña está aquí! (tn: the spider is here)

Which means Talon is here.

Which means…

Sombra grins to herself, and then darts back down through the tunnel, out on the ledge, and into the train car, snapping her invisibility off when she’s covered again. Jesse jolts a little when she
reappears, but the soldier seems entirely unfazed, asking, “Well?”

“There are six Helix Raptora units over there, but they’re currently in two groups of three. A sniper just brought down one, and that group’s on the other side of the gas station.” She taps at her handpad in the air, pulling up her map of the Gorge, and points at the space just to the east-southeast of the gas station, “They are gonna end up somewhere around here. The three we just saw chased off the snipers from this northwest corner.” She points at a ledge just a little ways above where the upper tunnel opens up. “But those three are distracted, so I think this ledge is clear. This map does not show it, but there’s cover here - ” her finger moves along the north part of the road, pointing to where the rock columns and billboard were when she saw them, “ - so that should give us access to the north gate tunnel if we’re fast.”

“The two of us are fast,” the soldier says to her, before adding dryly, “Pero esto vaquero sobre aquí...” (tn: but this cowboy over here)

“No mames, pendejo - hablo español bien, pinche cabrón (tn: don’t fuck around, asshole - I speak Spanish good, fucking dick),” Jesse snaps at him, and although Sombra can’t see his expression, she hazards that the soldier is rolling his eyes, muttering, “I know you do, that’s why I said it.”

She smirks again, because despite everything -

She kind of likes seeing Jack Morrison be snarky.

“We should hurry,” she chides the two of them, “The American soldiers are grouping up behind us.”

“Right, let’s go,” the soldier says, and they dart out into the sunlight for a brief second -

And then into the cool darkness of the tunnel. They pause only to peek out and assess the situation -

The carrier is moving fucking FAST, qué chingados.

It’s already reaching the northwest corner of the gas station, and is nearly level with their position -

“MOVE,” the soldier snaps at them, and they all rush out onto the ledge, pushing north and hugging the cliff as it swoops eastward, before they duck behind the sandstone columns, scrub brush, and a massive billboard that is somehow still standing.

“Alright,” the soldier whispers to them in a low, guttural voice, “There’s gotta be more Deadlock in this tunnel - ” he gestures to the entrance to the north gate tunnel just ahead of them, “ - So we hit them hard and fast, got it? Sombra?”

“Want me to scope it out again?” she offers, and he nods, but adds, “Be careful - don’t get yourself stuck in there.”

“Relajate, amigo - I do this all the time,” Sombra smiles at him, before disappearing again. She darts up to the entrance of the tunnel, and pops inside.

Not surprising - there are people here.

What is surprising, though, is that they’re all just...standing around.

There’s...five of them, maybe six, and the tunnel she’s in curves south directly into the brace of the gate, and then continues into the bluff before curving back out on what she assumes is the south side.

Meaning that if they control this gate,
They’ll have the perfect opportunity to launch the EMP.

The six Deadlock members aren’t really doing anything - a few of them are nervously waiting by the giant mechanical winch (it has an electronic operations panel, she notes, but also a physical crank as back up), but the others are just hanging out, guns not even ready and she’s pretty sure one is asleep against one of the brace walls, snoring softly.

Sombra backs out of the tunnel and reappears beside the other two behind the billboard, grinning. Jesse gives her a frown, asking quietly, “Look okay?”

“Maravilloso,” she says to them, “We could probably just launch some of those little rockets of yours, soldado, and kill them all - there’s only six of them and they’re all just standing around not doing anything.”

The soldier sits back a little, rocking slightly on his haunches, thinking mainly to himself, twiddling his fingers on the bottom of his gun, and Sombra finds the act strangely endearing...strangely humanizing.

Jack Morrison had always been something of an overwhelming figure in her mind, larger than life and overly idolized by the world. México had not dropped to its knees to worship him like many other parts of the world, and when he had been president, Portero had been a vocal critic of the Overwatch peacetime Strike-Commander. It had been one of the few things Sombra had agreed with him on, as did many people in México and Centroamérica.

But this man before her, esto soldado -

He cracks jokes in Spanish, he fidgets a little when he thinks, And he tells a near-stranger like her to be careful when taking on dangerous tasks.

“...Alright,” he says after a moment of contemplation, “Here’s the plan.”

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Segador: Route 66 - Move the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:04 a.m. - east of the gas station

His team moves in simultaneously as the two Helix fliers drop back down towards the ground.

Reaper’s half-tempted to fire a few shells into the guy on the ground, the one Widowmaker shot down, but he’s got so few precious rounds before he has to… “reload” that’s he’s not about to spend them on someone already incapacitated, even if the blueish glow of life still faintly pulses inside of him. Instead, the mercenary ghost focuses his attention on the two Helix fliers just about touching down. They’re maybe five or six meters away, a gap that Reaper is steadily closing, and one where the pellets of his shells could easily begin damaging them.

Beneath the mask, Reaper grins to himself, levels his right gun at them, and squeezes the trigger -

They’re just in the range where the fall-off distance won’t hinder the pellets much, but the Mark VI’s armor clearly offers durable protection: the most of the pellets clatter against the armor, but Reaper is rewarded with a few yelps and cries as some of them hit sensitive, exposed skin, stinging, nettling, and burning where the hot gunfire touches. Beside and behind him, the three Talon ground units are
firing off rifle shots and Reaper thinks for a quick second that they might actually get them, might actually fell two of the infamous Raptora fliers when -

“GET BACK,” a sharp, hard-edged feminine voice screams at them from up above their left shoulders and Reaper just barely has time to dart to his right reflexively when -

A concussion rocket bursts just to their lefts, exploding outwards with a pulsating wave that pushes the entire Talon team backwards away from its point of contact, radiating them out like the ripples of a drop into water. With his current position, Reaper is flung further eastward, smacking into the sandstone wall just below the upper east ramp and groaning to himself.

Fucking STUPID.

And after he had warned the others not to be so careless.

He had completely forgotten about the other set of Mark VI fliers, and had just blindly assumed they were still being held up by the wreckage site, but clearly -

Clearly they were not.

Reaper manages to twist himself around, jerking his left gun towards where the downed flier’s position was, and firing semi-blindly into the area. He’s pleased to hear more cries of pain as his pellets once again clatter against their metal-covered bodies, but a snarling, vicious fury inside him cries out in frustration at the lack of red-orange glows.

No deaths, only mild injuries.

He glances up into the airspace just north of the gas station, where the other three Helix units are shifting and weaving in the air, and he sees one of them ready a rocket launcher in his direction -

A rifle shot streaks by two of them, but it -

It hits the third.

The shot isn’t clean, and Reaper thinks that might have been due to Inigo’s - or maybe it was Francesca’s? - positioning, but it pierces the third flier’s leg and the man yells something in Arabic, shooting himself up and back, back to the west, landing with a limp on the ledge by the upper tunnel that leads back to the wreckage site. At whatever he said, the other two also rise steep and fast in the air, and though he doesn’t love the thought, Reaper leaves them for his team with the longer-range weaponry.

He pushes himself up off the wall and continues to fire his pellets at the two that have touched down by their fallen comrade.

One of them is lifting the guy off the ground - again, no red-orange soul globes to be seen, so the man must still be alive - and the other is turning to face him, squaring up the launcher in his direction and -

“ROCKET, GET YOUR HEADS DOWN,” Reaper shouts, his voice breaking and cracking with every other word at the sheer effort of getting that much volume out of his shredded vocal chords, and several things happen -

The man fires the rocket launcher -

Reaper’s three Talon agents hit the fuckin’ deck like good li’l soldiers -
Reaper shifts into wraith form.

The rocket whizzes through right where his stomach had been only a fraction of a second before and smashes into the wall behind him, sending up chunks and brittle bits of sandstone and dust into the air, but Reaper ignores that, wraithing himself forwards, towards the Helix trio with steady, undaunted determination and he sees the man who fired at him jerk back in sheer horror at what he’s seeing.

So okay,

Maybe there were…

A few perks to being stuck like this.

Reaper swoops in close to them, extremely close, like “every pellet is lethal at this range” close, so close he can taste the blue-green vida energies seeping out of their bodies, out of the small pellet wounds he’s peppered on them, out of the down flier’s broken limbs and limp form, and god, they taste like the beauty of life - a watery, liquidy glow that nourishes his soul and lifts the burning, burning, burning pain from his sun-heart -

He cracks a lefthanded punch across the first guy’s face and the man screams in pain as the steel-reinforced knuckles of a chemically-enhanced supersoldier fist breaks his left cheekbone and even cracks the screnglass of his visor, chipping off pieces of glass and -

The man instinctively jabs the butt of his rocket launcher into Reaper’s stomach and he recoils as the sudden dull blow bursts air and smoke from his lungs, and Reaper gives a choking gasp but raises his right gun to the man’s chest -

*Another fucking concussive blast* (where the fuck do they HIDE THOSE) knocks the two men away from each other - a short distance, maybe only two, two-and-a-half meters apart, and the three grounded Helix fliers rocket into the air, the one carrying the other guy speeding off over the gas station, with the one Reaper had socked attempting to trail behind him -

Reaper points his left gun up at him and fires off a round and -

The man doesn’t fall, but his whole body jerks and Reaper sees his left thruster fade and flare and fade and flare and good -

Between that and the broken face, the man just might be out for the count.

“Fall back,” Reaper shouts at his team, who have recovered from grounding themselves and are firing off shots at the fleeing Helix fliers. Reaper’s real close to the lower gate tunnel, the south one, and from this position, he can see the hover carrier with the bomb round the northwest corner of the road around the gas station and begin the final eastward push towards the gate itself, just twenty - thirty meters away and -

Was he mistaken, or did people just run into the north tunnel gate?

Reaper jerks his head back, eyeing the billboard on the north side of the road suspiciously, noting how the dust seems to curl up...like someone had just stirred it up and -

He’s tempted to enter the southern gate tunnel and check in on the Deadlock assholes stationed there, maybe it had been one of them popping out to check on progress, but Reaper’s pretty sure it had been two - maybe three people going in -
“We are in position,” Widowmaker’s voice sparks to life over the comms in his ear, and he glances back up, seeing her head peek out over the sandstone cliff ledge above him. He frowns to himself, giving another look to the north gate tunnel, before dissipating -

- and rematerializing up on the ledge beside her.

Henri behind her jumps a little at his sudden appearance, and the three other Talon members are rushing up from the south ramp to join them. Reaper scans the layout before them - there’s the haphazard planked bridge directly in front of them, connecting this cliff to the gas station’s roof, and they have a clear view of the carrier, Hernandez and his six other lackeys as the whole group inches towards the gate. The gate itself is inset to the cliff on Team Talon’s right, but Reaper finds he’s rather nervous because -

He can’t actually see the north gate tunnel from this position, as the cliff and some columns of rock block his view.

Fuck, he technically can’t see the south gate tunnel either, since it’s directly below them.

“Did you...see anyone behind that billboard?” he asks Widowmaker hesitantly, pointing to the billboard just north of the gas station and south of where the entrance to the north gate tunnel was. She cocks her head at him, raising an eyebrow, before muttering sharply, “No, I was too busy covering your ass as I fired off at those ‘Elix guards, fucking cowards.”

“...Maybe I should go and check on the gate -” Reaper begins -

But the sound of people screaming and the multiple red-orange orbs that fucking bloom on the road around the carrier cuts him off.

“Well isn’t that fucking swell,” Reaper snarls to his team.

The cavalry’s here.

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Сهیر (Saqh): Route 66 - Stop the Payload

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:05 a.m. - above the gas station

Fareeha soars after her Helix squad, furious with herself.

She cannot believe she let her team expose themselves to the snipers like that.

The Raptora Mark VI fliers always have to dance a very fine line - they need to be high enough for aerial superiority, so that they can move in and damage ground squads or even massive targets like the old Omnic Bastion units, but putting themselves out in the open like that exposes them to sniper fire or countering rocket blasts, and this battle certainly has plenty of both.

You did what you had to do and Tarq and Saleh know that, her voice calms her, Captain Khalil needed the covering fire to get himself and Mahmud and Aizad out of that spot.

She scowls to herself remembering how -

How that one man dressed in all black had -
Had simply dissolved into a smoking, ghostly form, Khalil’s rocket passing right through him.

She shudders a little, remembering her horror when Winston had first showed her the security camera footage -

bodies of Helix guards and Turkish military littering the ground, bullets and shotgun shells scattered about the floor around them, the giant, dark, furious figure smoking and gliding in between them, blood dipping and pouring everywhere, the metallic claws of his arm guards glinting in the half-lighting of the old Watchpoint -

Fareeha sharpens her focus.

Now is NOT the time to lose her nerve...even if ghosts and monsters do worry her.

Just a little.

She soars past the southwestern corner of the gas station, pulling back on her thrusters and dropping down behind the sandstone ledge where her team had first taken shelter out of the train cars, and she’s immediately pushing herself to Mahmud, who is gingerly setting Aizad on the ground.

“IS HE - ” she asks, and Mahmud sighs, both relief and anxiety running through him like a string and Fareeha notes all the shotgun pellet marks in his armor and even a few on the exposed part of his chin. He replies, “He is alive, but extremely injured. One of his thrusters is out, which is why he fell, but,” Mahmud shakes his head, “The fall was bad, Lieutenant. Visor’s saying he’s got three broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, probable concussion. He needs help right now - ”

Saleh touches down besides them, saying rapidly, “Tarq’s okay, we got his leg patched up and some nanoboosters stitching it up, but he’s gonna have to do just covering fire for the rest of us. Where -” he blinks at them, as if just realizing he’s only the fourth one there, “Is the Captain?”

There’s a shout behind them, and the three conscious individuals glance up. Khalil’s pushing his Mark VI as fast as he can over the gas station, but he’s jerking about, his left shoulder thruster flaring in and out of life precariously as he rises and falls, rises and falls -

He lowers his propulsion and half-careens, half-glides himself to a skittering landing besides them, muttering and cursing in Arabic:

“ابن الحمار (tn: son of a donkey),” he snaps, shaking his left shoulder and they all hear the rattling of loose, broken parts in the thruster, “The ghost-man ruined it.” He sighs in frustration, “Looks like I’ll be giving you guys ground-only support.” His face looks terrible, his left cheek is swelling up and the tissue around his eye is bloody.

“What?” Fareeha asks, “So we have one unconscious and gravely injured, one with a wounded leg, and another who cannot fly?” Saleh looks miserable and Mahmud appears worried, but Khalil sighs again, “We cannot change what is currently happening, we can only change our plans moving forward. Amari, you are in charge of the aerial units from here on out. But we are going to have to scale way back to keep ourselves condensed and close to cover. Tarq and I will join up and keep rank with the American military whenever they arrive - ”

“They are here,” says a familiar electronic-enhanced voice behind them, “As am I.”

The group turns and sees Okoro approaching them westward along the ledge, and they’re carrying a box with a big red cross stamped on it.

“Okoro, you are a lifesaver,” Mahmud sighs with relief as the logistician kneels besides Aizad’s limp
form. Okoro nods politely, snapping the box open and cracking a biotic field vial, and Fareeha immediately feels some her exhaustion melt off, and she watches as the gunfire burn marks on Mahmud and Khalil’s faces fade a little, with the swelling correcting itself on Khalil’s cheek. Aizad’s chest rises and falls with a more even rhythm to it, and Okoro pulls out a syringe and a vial of golden-yellow liquid.

Nanoboosters.

Fareeha feels a twinge of sorrow in the pit of her stomach as she recalls her mother showing her the small vial, the first one of its kind, in the sunlight of her office, Ana’s smile radiant and warm as she spoke of the possibilities of applying it on the battlefield -

*You got your wish, mother,* Fareeha thinks sadly to herself, though she is also fiercely proud of the work her mother pioneered in medical technology, *These nanoboosters will save Aizad’s life today.* Okoro preps the syringe and, their face light flashing one-two-three, locates a good spot at the base of Aizad’s exposed neck and injects the liquid into his body.

“This will stop the internal bleeding shortly,” Okoro states calmly, before rummaging again in the box and pulling out several bandages, “His head wounds and ribs will be more complicated. The nanoboosters will help with some of the broken bone damage but they cannot facilitate the process to be much faster. I can remove his armor and splint some of his chest, but he will primarily need bed rest and a blood transfusion as soon as possible. At the moment, I do not think brain surgery is required - his helmet has protected his head.”

“Very good, Okoro,” Khalil nods to the Omnic, “Watch over him, and perhaps I will send Tarq to you as well - his leg needs some attention and - Oh, Allah.”

Fareeha glances up at the road and -

Oh.

That is a lot of U.S. military soldiers.

There’s maybe - fifteen? Twenty? of them, grouped into squads of five, rushing around the corner and up the road, they’re opening fire on the Deadlock members by the carrier which is just barely rounding the northwest corner of the road and beginning to move eastward to the large gate set into the sandstone cliff. Some of them - reckless fools! - are hurling grenades and concussive bombs at the people by the carrier, and in response, some of the Deadlock gang cry out and launch several rockets at the soldiers -

“DOWN,” Khalil screams at them and they all drop, feeling the shudder of the rocket as it slams into the road next to them and the dust and cobbles clatter against their armor. The shouts and screams and gunfire continue, and Fareeha squints in Khalil’s direction, asking loudly, “Should we join them, sir?”

“Not yet!” he replies, equally loud over the din of the renewed fighting, “Let’s see if they can take out the ones with the rocket launchers. Once they’re down, head out and cover them!”

Fareeha thinks she’s pretty okay with that plan, as she watches Okoro begin to systematically pry off Aizad’s armor -

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**Soliste: Route 66 - Move the Payload**
Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:05 a.m. - on the cliff to the south of the first gate

The payload is approaching the gate.

The hover carrier is still chugging along, pushing past the north side of the gas station, just barely reaching the northeast corner of the building, and merde, it’s so close to the gate - a mere ten meters away now and -

There are four Deadlock members still moving the payload, but they’ve turned around and are firing rifles and automatic pistols and even some rocket launchers at the American soldiers pushing back on them. Hernandez has taken up a position by the north door of the gas station, weaving in and out and firing rockets at the soldiers in the northwest corner of the road but there are just SO MANY American soldiers, rushing in and out of the tunnels, swooping up around the gas station, and -

Widowmaker watches as another Deadlock member falls and Reaper beside her growls out some vulgar swear in Spanish, the Talon agents beside them worried and anxious.

Certainly, the Deadlock members are putting up one beautiful display of a fight, felling two or even three American soldiers with their heavy gunfire and rockets, but it is only a matter of time before those Helix fliers return and - with their combined forces - obliterate the remaining gang members.

“Pinche idiotas,” Reaper hisses, “Why isn’t the gate crew opening up and helping them out?”

Because the payload is approaching the gate -

Nearly eight or seven meters now -

Another Deadlock member falls -

Widowmaker is lining up her shots, snapping her camera lens on -

Her diamond hit marker blinks as an American soldier rushes into her view and she squeezes the trigger - BAM - and he falls, but another moves in to take his place, and her shot is not fully charged but she fires it off anyways - BAM - and he screams, jerking back, but he is not dead, just injured, she thinks she grazed his arm and another soldier moves into her frame and -

Rough hands grab her and jerk her to the ground, and her world is a sliding mess of zoomed-in focus shots of the gas station, sandstone cliff walls, the blue sky above, and -

“Dumbass! Watch yourself.” Reaper is hissing as her headgear opens back up and she blinks a few times to refocus her eyes as more counter-sniper fire sprays the cliffs behind them. The four Talon agents are also on the ground beside them, and the whole group wiggles back a little behind a column of rock and scrub. Reaper, crouching next to her, holds up a long clawed finger in her face and snaps, “This is why I said you need better armor, joder, that fuckwad would’ve put a bullet in your damn heart with how exposed you were -”

“Now is not the time!” she snaps right back at him, “We ‘ave to ‘elp cover Deadlock and get the bomb to the gate!”

“You think I don’t know that?” he retorts sharply, “This is literally what I said would happen in the worst-case scenario, and that fucker Hernandez was like, ‘It’s fine, we don’t need more people in all those tunnels and buildings’ even though this place is a fucking maze and is PERFECT for ambushes. Like FUCK, five or six more dudes on that payload right now and Hernandez and the
soldiers would have been evenly matched, but no, no, we need people to fucking keep the gate closed because I don’t know, just leaving it open to begin with is apparently too much to ask?”

“REAPER,” Widowmaker nearly screams at him, “WE DO NOT. ‘AVE TIME.”

“We - ” Inigo starts and falters a bit under their glares, but he soldiers on, “We have six people here.”

There’s a fraction of a second of silence as they contemplate his answer and then -

“No,” Reaper says coldly, “No fucking way. I’m not risking all of us for this shitshow of a mission.”

“Salad, there will not be a mission if this fails!” Widowmaker replies angrily, and he tilts his head in her direction, muttering, “I never said we were gonna fail it.”

“What -”

The payload is approaching the gate.

Six - wait, maybe five meters now, just edging halfway past the northeast corner of the gas station.

There are only three Deadlock members still running with it.

There are still eight to ten American soldiers swarming it.

The gate is still closed.

The payload is approaching the gate.

The payload is not going to make it.

Reaper draws himself up to his full, looming height, smoke billowing and the cape of his jacket snapping and how the fuck did he manage to look so menacing and heroic at the same time, could she get her hair to do that kind of “breezy, charismatic” thing he’s got going on?

He crosses his arms into an X over his chest, bows his head towards them and growls out, “Watch this sick shit, pendejos.” and then he -

He disappears.

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**Soldado: Route 66 - Destroy the Payload**

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:03 a.m. - the north gate tunnel entrance

Saying that it was “easy” capturing the first cliff gate would be a fucking understatement.

They had fucking *wrecked*.

There had been some fighting just south of the road, south of the billboard, and a few Helix fliers had taken to the skies above them, but no one had managed to notice the three amigos that had rushed into the darkness and relative security of the tunnel. Following what Sombrero had said, 76 turns to his right and for a brief second, he sees all six of the Deadlock members stationed there, as if in slow motion -
The one closest to them glances at them in confusion and 76 revels a little in the shock that spreads on his face and -

76 whips his heavy pulse rifle directly down at them and flicks the switch for the mini-helix rockets. They pop out of an accessory barrel with a fizz and whiz past the first guy, the second guy, and explode with a burst of blue flame around the third guy, knocking back at least the five closest people and sending them sprawling. Without missing a beat, 76 snaps the barrel of the gun at the head of the first guy closest to them, and jerks the trigger, and his whole body goes slack as the pulse pops part of his face.

Beside him, Jesse rips a bullet in the fourth guy - as the third one is dead from the rocket impact - and Sombra flitters her way up to the second guy, punching a lithe hand into his gut before spraying pistol shots into his chest, and he falls over without ever making a sound. Jesse is rushing the last guy, who is scrambling to his feet from where he was sleeping, as 76 levels the rifle at the fifth guy and snaps several pulse shots into his body.

“Flash out,” Jesse drawls, and 76 reflexively shuts his eyes, there’s a pop, and then a bang of the revolver, and the final one groans, falling over dead or at least severely injured.

The three of them stand around the smoking corpses and just kinda of...look at each other in a moment of calm.

Jesse scratches at his unruly hair, muttering dryly, “Well shit, y’all, that was a thing of beauty right there.” Sombra flashes a wild grin, saying, “We work together very well, mis amigos.”

“I’m not getting buddy-buddy with either of you just yet,” 76 sighs sharply, moving down the brace. It’s an odd thing - like someone back in the last century had hollowed out this part of the cliff just to pave the road to go through it, and rather than curve the cut like a normal tunnel, had decided to go for a square edge and cement in the brace and gate. The east side of the cliff is entirely open to the rest of the gorge, and 76 can see all the buildings on this side - a hotel, a bar, a mechanic shop - all run down and peeling paint like the diner. There are a number of...modifications that Deadlock seem to have made to the area - platforms and walkways that connect a lot of the buildings together on their second levels or roofs.

But more than that, 76 eyes the ramp that runs down from the south part of the cliff, and the southern gate tunnel just beneath it.

Weak points in the defense.

Jesse rolls his eyes as the soldier huffs past him, drawling, “Well, there just ain’t pleasin’ some people.”

“Mission ain’t over yet,” 76 mocks back, heading into the darkness of the southern tunnel. He sweeps the area, but truly, there’s no one else here, and he turns back to them, directing them, “Alright, Jesse, you take the north tunnel; Sombra, you just pick one. The carrier is - ” he stops, glancing out of the tunnel to the street and -

Holy.

Fuck.

The American soldiers have rallied themselves and are pushing back hard against the four - wait, no, one falls to the ground - three remaining Deadlock members on the payload. There’s at minimum nine American soldiers, and 76 doesn’t have to do the math to know that it’s looking REAL bad.
Not just for Deadlock, but for their little group as well.

“FUCK!” he hisses, and Jesse and Sombra rush over to him, peering out from behind the rock. Jesse swears and Sombra mutters, “Ah Dios, this is bad. This is very bad. They’re not gonna make it.”

“If I can get a clean shot on them,” Jesse says, reloading his revolver, “I can get six of them, dead, only takes a few seconds - ”

“Alright, we stick to the plan,” 76 says, gesturing for Jesse to move back up to the north side of the gate, “You take north, I’ll take south - if I activate the tactical visor, I can get auto-aim on all of them, but I can only fire at one at a time - ”

“Better pray you got a fast trigger finger there, partner,” Jesse says casually, but there’s a twinge of concern in his Santa Fe twang. Suddenly, without warning, there’s a metal hand on his back and 76 jerks up, glancing at the cowboy in surprise. Jesse nods his head at the soldier gently, murmuring, “We’re gonna be alright, amigos. I’m headin’ up.”

“Good luck,” 76 says to him as he trots off, “Don’t go out until you hear my call.”

“Gotcha, pops.”

“And Sombra, where - ?” he turns to ask her, but she just sets her face in grim determination, saying, “I’m staying here. When you two clear them out, I’ll cloak and rush out there with the EMP.”

76’s gaze lingers on her for a moment - the faint redness of blood pumping adrenaline to her dark cheeks, the flickering of her biopanels, her fierce gaze out at the chaos happening in the street before them, her fingers shifting nervously on her pistol and -

He calmly sets a hand on her shoulder.

She jumps a little, snapping, “¿Qué??” but he just replies as peacefully as he can, “You’re gonna be alright, kid.”

“Don’t treat me like a child,” she snaps at him angrily, but he can still sense some of the anxiety in her hunched shoulders, her tense form, and he just chuckles, “Everyone’s a kid when you’re my age. But don’t worry - we’re here, and we’re gonna finish this.”

Sombra frowns at him a little, and then shrugs her shoulders, relaxing a bit, as she mutters, “You mean I’m gonna finish this.”

“Who’s the one who needed some bodyguards?” he jokes back to her, squaring up his rifle again. The carrier is close, only about four or fix meters from the gate, edging past the corner of the gas station and coming into hyperfocus view for him. There’s still only three Deadlock members on it, but one of them is limping heavily and struggling to keep up, even as the giant man - Hernandez, 76 remember dimly - is firing rockets aimlessly at the American soldiers, but they scatter like leaves in the winds, barely broken.

The limping Deadlock member falls to the ground and the American soldiers take that as a sign to push even harder, surrounding the carrier and the two remaining gang members and -

76 takes a deep sigh.

Across the street, he sees Jesse in the half-shadows of the north tunnel entrance, and the cowboy nods at him.
76 takes a step forward, half in the sunlight, half in the shade -
76 raises his left fingers to the buttons on the side of his visor and -
A cloud of black smoke suddenly drifts around the payload -
His fingers freeze, barely brushing on the buttons -
In a matter of a few tiny, fractions of a second, the smoke swirls in on itself, condensing, forming, taking shape -
Impossible.
His breath stops.
A tall, broad figure emerges, dressed in a long black overcoat that rustles dramatically in the wind and if he wasn’t so fucking distraught, Jack would fucking laugh -
Because Gabriel’s always had a fucking flair for making dramatic entrances ---

[Segador: Route 66 - Play of the Game]

(He reforms into something solid, something strong, and even though there’s fucking pain ribboning through his body, he can’t stop now, he has to keep going, has to move the payload, has to defend Widowmaker, has to kill, has to drink, has to drink, has to drink up life and death and life - )

Before the soldiers even have time to react, the figure on the payload snaps out his arms, and Jack traces the outline of the head - cracking its neck - down the heavy shoulders, over the strong arms, out to the shotguns cocked in each hand and -

(He spreads his arms like he’s going to embrace them, and he thinks to himself that the darkness consumes all - just as it had consumed him, it would consume them and fuck, it would taste like the sweetness of water and life to his parched, dying-living-dying-living sunsoul - )

The world lights up as tiny sprays of fire and wrath rip out of him, and he’s spinning and swirling and moving like he’s gliding on ice, like he’s not entirely part of the world around him, as if he is merely an ephemeral shadow passing through and the laws of gravity do not fully apply to him. The shots of hellfire and sunflares and little bits of burning, seething rage riddle the soldiers surrounding him, and there’s screams and shouts as they collapse in twitching, writhing masses on the ground, blood splattering outwards like someone has run a heart through a blender and kept the lid off - red liquid and red chunks and red gore painting the ground like a Pollock as bodies fall like rain, and bullets and shotgun pellets and tiny, piercing spits of flame rattle through the air -

(The sunsoul in his core bursts out with burning, painful, screaming heat - red hot red hot white hot - and everything hurts, everything hurts, but it feels so good too, it burns it burns but it’s not just burning him - it’s lashing out in firestrikes and arrows, in needles and darts at the soldiers around him and the fire serpent is wrapping around his body, hissing and burning and singing with joy as the life is drained from the soldiers, their bodies collapsing under the heat and pressure and the bite of his bullets and needles, their screams nourish the war in his soul and their soul orbs nourish the sun in his heart and he’s spinning, moving, singing to himself as he rejoices in the blood spilling onto the cracked, broken pavement - )

There’s a high, hard, cruel laugh that cuts through Jack’s heart like an obsidian blade -

(He drinks in their lives and deaths, vidas y muertes, reveling in the taste of water and blood and
shifting blue-green, red-orange orbs as they spiral into him, swirling up his smoke and body and embracing him as tenderly as a lover - )

He comes to a stop, arms raised slightly and feet hovering a few inches off the ground like he’s suspended in liquid - the smoke doesn’t entirely stop, continuing to swirl around him like the blooming of ink drops in water, and Jack thinks - just thinks - he sees some swirls of red and gold and amber drift through the smoke, curling up around those strong arms and that broad torso and even wrapping a few dusty, glittering vines around his neck. His feet touch the ground and because -

(It hurts, it hurts, but it feels so good, the power and the pain in his body and reverberating up his arms and into his shoulders and into his chest and into his sunsoul, like the recoil of a shotgun, strong and powerful and heavy against him, just the way he likes it - )

Because he has to be fucking dramatic about everything -

He skews his hips slightly, spinning a shotgun around in his right hand, as the smoke and dust and red-gold-amber and unnerving quiet of the dead settles around him, and he chuckles:

“Now THAT is how you secure a payload.”

He turns around with a slight swagger and for the first time Jack can see his face -

He’s wearing some sort of stylized skull mask, the eyes dark, the cheeks hollowed out, and there are shells and small carrier containers - just like what he used to like wearing during Blackwatch missions - strapped across his chest and hips. He’s still slightly twirling the shotguns in his hands, and he’s glancing up at something above the south gate tunnel, saying loudly, “Alright, pendejos, let’s get this fuckin’ gate open - ”

(He stops, because there’s someone under the frame of the south tunnel that goes into the gate - a figure with their face obscured in electronic reds, hefting a blue-steeled heavy pulse rifle, left hand raised to their temple - )

He stops.

And Jack stops.

And even though neither of them can actually see the other’s face

They make eye contact.

---------

There’s a room in a hotel in New York City

That shares our fate and deserves our pity

I don't want to remember it all

The promises I made, if you just hold on

Hold on,

Hold on,
Hold on,

Hold on.

I just need enough of you to dull the pain
Just to get me through the night till we're twins again
Till we're stripped down to our skeletons again
Till we're saints just swimming in our sins again -

And there's a jet-black crow droning on and on and on -

Chapter End Notes

Typical Reaper POTG - drop in, shoot things in a circle, kill a bunch of people, spray the teabag tag, immediately plan on leaving the payload.
[Overtime]
Under the bright Southwestern sun -
A reaper and a soldier meet again.
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Remember -
Stay on the payload
Or you lose.

Chapter Notes

Song is "Twin Skeleton's (Hotel in NYC)" by Fall Out Boy (Youtube)

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Warning: angry, bitter ranting, descriptions of emotional pain, descriptions of depressive thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Route 66 - Overtime

I just need enough of you to dull the pain
Just to get me through the night till we're twins again
Till we're stripped down to our skeletons again
Till we're saints just swimming in our sins again

And there's a jet black crow droning on and on and on
Up above our heads, droning on and on and on
Keep making trouble 'till you find what you love,
I need a new partner in crime and you -

You shrug
There's a room in a hotel in New York City
That shares our fate and deserves our pity
I don't want to remember it all
The promises I made, if you just hold on
Hold on,
Hold on,
Hold on,
Hold on

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Soldado y Segador: Route 66 - Overtime

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:06 a.m. - the payload

For a single, almost imperceptible moment
Time stops.
The two men stare each other down, barely reacting, barely daring to breathe.
Shotguns drop from hands and clatter on the ground.
There are many ways that he could describe how Gabriel Reyes has impacted his life, but if he had to choose only one, Jack would probably describe it as being “world-stopping.”
Because that’s what Gabriel always seemed to be able to do.
So much of Jack’s life is cut into thin slices of memories that seem almost still-frame, where Gabriel does something seemingly impossible, where it feels like the air has been sucked from Jack’s lungs as he watches breathless, where it feels like the world has stopped turning and the movements of the wind, water, the geological shifting of tectonic plates, and time itself halt and bend themselves to the power of the man before them.
Where Gabriel stops the entirety of the world itself.
And that is precisely what is happening here, in this moment, at a little past nine in the morning, under the hot, arid blaze of the Southwest sun, dust and smoke and sunbeams and the scent of shotgun pellets stilling in the air as the world screeches to a halt, derailing from its orbit, fighting off the physics of the universe to pause simply because the dark-cloaked skull-masked man before him wills it.
And if Reaper could describe this moment, and how Jack impacts it, and if he could only use one
way to describe it, he would probably describe it as:

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
cool, cleansing rain -

“Gabriel,” the soldier chokes out as they slam into the ground and the full weight of the furious man crashes into him and Jack is struggling to get leverage because what the actual fuck is happening, why is Gabriel doing this, where is Sombra, what the fuck is going on, why is Gabriel here - holy shit, Gabriel, holy shit - I thought you were dead, I thought you had disappeared in a cloud of smoke, don’t leave, Gabriel, stay here, Gabriel -

There’s the smell of burning flesh and the crackling of fire as Jack watches in horror as smoke pours out of the holes of Gabriel’s skull mask and the exposed ash-grey-earth-brown skin of his neck and arms rip open and there’s only glowing, vivid, burning heat where the skin parts and red - bright red - tactical-visor-activated red eyes burn through the darkness of the eye orbits of the mask and bore into him -

The reaper’s hands are wrapped around the soldier’s neck, squeezing, squeezing, shredding the Kevlar fabric there and cutting into his skin, soft and fresh and blood - beautiful, beautiful, so sweet - blood pools out onto the steel tips of his claws and god, he can fucking taste the sweetness of Jack’s soul, which pulsates white blue gold blue gold white in rhythm to the beat of his heart, and -

It is the most beautiful thing the reaper has ever seen.

It shimmers and shivers like waves of water beneath moonlight, glittering and glowing and rippling outwards with a bittersweet ache - with the taste of sweet sugar-water and the bitterness of coffee and the dreamy smoothness of a good beer and the smell of pulse munition and shotgun shell smoke and the clean scent of Jack’s skin, which he is currently shredding and flaying and god, GOD -

he wants, he wants, he wants

If he possesses it

If he claims it

If he drinks it

He would be complete.

Nothing would hurt.

Everything would be better.

He would be better.

And even though the skin around his neck is screaming, screaming, screaming with pain, Jack raises a trembling hand to Gabriel’s mask, fingers gingerly touching the hard-edged cheekbone there and Gabriel -

The reaper stops.

He jerks his head, glancing at the hand like it’s not real, a snake going to bite him, a monster caressing him tenderly, and he hasn’t, he hasn’t

He hasn’t had someone touch him this sweetly in years.

His hands lose a bit of their grip on the soldier’s neck and he’s not really sure what the fuck is going on, there’s still screaming in his head and his sunsoul and everything is pulsating and raging red hot
red hot white hot but there’s something crying inside him now and what the fuck is that, where is that ache coming from, why does everything hurt so bad

Those gentle fingers return to trace along the edge of his mask, just beneath his right eye and even though he’s fucking covered in armor and black cloth and a mask, he feels so exposed, as if the gloved fingers are touching his own skin and -

Something fucking rushes by them and both the soldado de héroes and the segador de almas lift their heads a little and glance at the wind that moved past them, just the wind, only the wind -

“EMP ACTIVATED,” a woman shouts at them and there’s a tsunami of energy that rushes over them, careening and crashing into them and the gate and the surrounding sandstone cliffs and someone else above them is swearing something in French, Jack thinks, maybe? He’s not sure, he’s disoriented, the tactical visor spits and surges and struggles to stay alive under the crushing electrical pulses and the reaper is hissing something as the shockwaves crash into his body, disrupting the energy of his sunsoul, stamping out the heat beneath his skin with a strange sizzle and it feels like he’s been fucking tasered -

The reaper twists around but doesn’t let up on the soldier, keeping his right hand on his neck even as he snaps back and forth, and spots -

What the fuck

Is that

Is that fucking Jesse McCree?

...What the actual fuck is he wearing.

Jesse fucking hurls something directly at them and the soldier manages to wheeze out, “Oh shit - ”

Before the cylinder breaks against the payload and a burst of light blasts out.

“QUE CHINGADOS, PENDEJO - ” the reaper hisses as the world blurs out into a blaze of white and the soldier manages to shut his eyes in time, and when the light begins to fade behind his eyelids, he snaps them back open, thrashing against Gabriel above him. It’s fairly easy with how the flashbang has knocked loose all his senses, and the soldier heaves the heavy pulse rifle against the man, pushing him back and forcing himself into a sitting position. The reaper is hissing and snarling furiously, scrambling to keep his grip on the soldier but the man just won’t sit fucking still, let me devour your soul, fucking asshole, want it, want it, want it -

The soldier is battering away Gabriel’s fucking claw-tipped hands when -

Something appears in the skies above them.

Actually, several somethings.

Three somethings.

Three Helix Mark VI units spread their “wings” and -

Oh fuck.

“MOVE, FUCKWAD,” the soldier snaps at the reaper, practically throwing him off to the right and towards the darkness of the southern gate tunnel and the reaper - still pretty much whited-out -
bounces around once, twice and then something sharp is gripping his back and jerking him up in the air as some feminine voice cracks out, “JUSTICE RAINS FROM ABOVE” and there’s the whistling and explosion of rocket missiles crashing into the ground -

After throwing the reaper loose, the soldier scrambles to his feet, rushing out of the way and bolting down the street, before darting to his left and into the shelter of the gas station as fucking hellfire rains down on the street outside and -

Oh.

The burly Deadlock man known as Hernandez is sitting in a corner of the gas station, alongside another Deadlock member as they huddle around a biotic field.

“...Uh,” Hernandez says dumbly and the soldier has half a mind to riddle his body with pulse rifle rounds but fuck it, he can’t stay here, he needs to get out and get to safety, blood is dripping down his neck and seeping into the mesh fabric of the Kevlar and god fucking dammit, Gabriel, what the actual fuck, cabrón, what the fucking shit -

The soldier ignores the two Deadlock members and burst out the open, west garage doors, straight into the lower tunnel that will take him back to the wreckage site and hopefully to the relative safety of the diner.

The soldier enters into the cool darkness of the tunnel -

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**Segador: Route 66 - Overtime**

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:06 a.m. - the southern gate cliff

Something drags him, heaving and huffing, up the side of the sandstone cliff but he barely comprehends anything because

*Everything hurts everything hurts, fuck you Jack you piece of shit, fucking FUCK, everything hurts everything hurts, make the pain stop, Jack, make it stop, where did you go, come back, come back, let me drink your life, love you, want it, want it, want it, wish that you were dead, wish that I was dead, everything hurts everything hurts red hot red hot white hot, everything BURNS*

His sunsoul is screaming and he is screaming and there is screaming inside of him everything is burning, the walls are falling in around him, his skin is melting, his lungs are collapsing inside of him, there is only smoke and dust and concrete and fire and anger, burning anger, red hot red hot white hot, burning hatred and rage and *everything hurts, everything hurts, everything hurts, Jack make it better, Jack where did you go come back*

*i am going to rip your heart out of your chest and drink the life from your soul everything hurts everything hurts*
At some point there had been gentle fingers touching his mask and it had felt like they had been touching his skin and he does not know where they have gone, but he wants, he wants, he wants -

Soliste: Route 66 - Overtime

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:06 a.m. - the southern gate cliff

It takes all of her strength, plus Henri and Inigo, to ground her enough to haul his flailing, screaming ass up the side of the cliff and out of danger.

Widowmaker is amazed her grapple even managed to snag him in time, but it had been a well-aimed shot - she had timed it just right so that when the other man had knocked the reaper loose, it would grip him on the second bounce.

The whole team throws their hands on him as he appears up over the edge of the cliff path, and they all, as a group, fucking drag him back into the shelter of the dark tunnel behind them, as rockets pound into the spot on the cliff they had just been standing on.

The group collapses on the ground in the darkness, breathing heavily, and the reaper scrambles to his feet, screaming and frothing and raging, smoke pouring out of his mask and from under his overcoat and he’s shouting something in rambling, incoherent mixed Spanish and English, even as Francesca cracks another biotic field and Widowmaker feels warmth and energy seep into her cold skin and she is

She is FURIOUS.

The reaper is already storming back towards the entrance of the cave, as if he’s about to go back out there and continue fighting, when Widowmaker snaps herself up to her full height, and latches a hand onto his shoulder, screaming at him, "**QUEL SALAUD, WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT -**"

"**DON’T FUCKING STOP ME, PENEDEJA, I’LL KILL HIM, I’M GONNA KILL HIM, THAT MOTHERFUCKING ASSHOLE, THAT HIJO DE PUTA, I’LL FUCKING TEAR HIS HEAD OFF AND RIP HIS HEART OUT -**" the reaper is seething, raging, ranting, clenching his hands and smoke appears in them, and a single, massive shotgun appears between them, dangerous and heavy and furious in its appearance

And for the first time

She realizes he is truly not human.

Not in this moment.

Not right now.

The Talon agents are cowering back, huddling around each other and Widowmaker is at a loss for what to do, she’s never had to do this before, never had to convince someone not to go, not to do something so horrific that they will never be human again.

She does not know why she know this.

But all she knows is
If he leaves now, he will not return.

She does not know how she knows this, but simply that she does.

If he leaves now

Whatever is left of Gabriel Reyes will not return.

Only his shadow will remain.

Only his shadow will return.

And she does not know why she feels this,

But she cannot let that happen.

In slow motion, the reaper goes, smoke and dust and anger trailing after him, and he moves to leave when she says, very softly - so softly she is not certain who exactly is speaking:

“If you leave, I will tell them that you have betrayed Talon.”

This gets the man underneath the smoke and shadows to pause, and his hulking form slows, before tilting his head a little over his shoulder. She does not look at him, and she does not know why she knows this, but she knows that he has received the real meaning behind her words.

Talon does not allow traitors to return.

If he leaves now

He will not be allowed to return.

If he leaves now

They will never see each other again.

She does not know why she thinks this, but she thinks it anyways:

I do not need the Reaper here.

I need Gabriel Reyes here.

Truly, the Reaper was a remarkable, magnifique killer - relentless, ruthless, literally thirsty for death - but startlingly, he was replaceable. The world had no problems with crafting, making, and spinning killers out of men.

But Gabriel Reyes -

Even a shard of the soul of Gabriel Reyes was worth the whole of the wretched world itself.

This much she knew.

He stops completely, dead in his tracks, even though his massive form is still seething, heaving, raging, smoke swirling around him slowly like it is alive, contemplating the situation, and then -

“FUCK - ” he screams, hurling the giant shotgun against the wall of the tunnel and both the sound and the crash of the metal against the sandstone startle her, and the gun explodes into a million jagged metal bits and she flinches at both his voice and the shrapnel, but the shrapnel never comes,
and a few wisps of smoke grace against her pale skin instead and she blinks a few times in confusion as he storms back and forth, pacing, pacing, smoke billowing -

“Fucking FUCK, fuckers, pinche pendejos, motherfuckers, FUCK - ” he states eloquently, and Widowmaker licks her lips, saying dryly, “Oui, you ’ave made your point quite clear.”

He snaps his head towards her, and she shivers -

There are vibrant, glowing red eyes peering out at her from the darkness of his mask.

Behind her, one of the Talon agent whimpers -

His exposed skin is cracking again, red hot strands of fire bursting up from the tears and Mon Dieu, she feels so small and weak before him -

Would a shot to his head even kill him -

Stand strong, mon ballerine, a soft, gentle, warm voice calls her distantly from the past, and her eyes flutter closed and she breathes inhale-exhale, once-twice, and then stops.

Her eyes open, her breath stills.

She takes her shot.

“Focus,” she hisses at him, swooping up into his space, startling him with her sudden movement, and she grips at the loose, hanging fabric of his jacket, and jerks him close, so close that she stares straight into the eyes of hell and hell stares back and she does not fear him -

She has never feared him.

“What are you doing?” she snarls at him, “Where will you even go? Do you think that killing...that man will even do anything? Will it even make anything better - ”

“Me,” he snaps at her, “It will make ME better - ”

“NO, IT WILL NOT, ENCULE, YOU JUST WANT TO THINK THAT WOULD,” Widowmaker screams at him, and despite him having about an extra one-hundred and fifty pounds on her, she manages to shake him slightly, snapping him back and forth a little.

“WILL YOU ABANDON US ’ERE? AGAIN?? LIKE YOU DID TO ME??”

She does not know where the last part came from.

She does not know

She does not know

She does not know

She does not know

She does not know

She does not know

No -
Her hands fall from his jacket as her body goes slack and everything is slipping, slipping, there is blinding, numbing pain spreading in her head and she shudders - no, no, not the pain, keep it away, keep it away, KEEP IT AWAY -

She’ll do anything, anything they ask, just stop the pain, please, pitié, please, PLEASE -

Strong hands grip her shoulders and she jerks back to life to see a skull staring back at her, but the voice that’s calling to her is stronger, firmer, saying something in a voice that’s grating but struggling - struggling so desperately - to be kind:

“Holy shit, holy shit, come back, uh, fuck, Widowmaker, holy shit, I’m sorry, wait, just come on, don’t do this right now, we’re still here, I’m still here - ”

She blinks a few times.

The skull fades in and out of focus.

She blinks again.

She regains herself.

She does not know how.

“I...I am ‘ere,” she murmurs slowly, her tongue feeling thick and heavy and swollen in her mouth, and her head lolls back a little, she’s struggling to keep it upright, and she hears it again:

*Stand strong, mon ballerine*

*I will, she whispers back, I will, I am trying*

*But it is just so hard, Gerârd.*

*I am just so tired.*

*But I will stand strong.*

She straightens her head back out and wiggles her fingers, driving back the numbness that has crept over her body, feeling the blood push and push and move back into her limbs, and he -

Reaper sighs with relief.

And in the shadowy half-light of the cave,

After nearly losing the other to depths of the darkness,

They have met again.

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**Soldado: Route 66 - Victory**

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:07 a.m. - the Panorama Diner

He bursts through the central doors, wheezing and coughing and gagging, and when he skids around the entryway into the diner proper, he collapses against the center support wall, breathing hard as the
claws of his soul shred into his lungs.

His windpipe is still struggling to retake its normal shape and his entire neck is coated in blood and he jerks his hand to his biotic field supply, grabs one, and snaps it onto the tile next to him -

Immediate relief storms into his throbbing senses as the aerosolized nanoboosters fill his lungs, and he breathes a little easier as they help prop up his trachea a bit and the bleeding from the cut marks on his neck begins to clot.

He sits like that, leaning his head against the wall, trying not to think -

*Gabriel.*

*He’s alive.*

*And not a senseless ball of smoke like the last time.*

He could not

He could not begin to describe the emotions that flood through him like the bursting of a dam, like an earthquake beneath the ocean, like a torrential rain. There’s relief - yes, sweet, loving, thrilled relief that Gabriel is alive, alive and maybe not okay - and then because of the “not okay” - there’s concern, fear, anxiety, that Gabriel is alone and confused and in really deep shit like usual and then there’s anger, rage, confusion - why did Gabriel attack him, why had he nearly strangled him, what had he missed -

Again.

How did he keep missing important issues?

How did he keep fucking this up?

How could he keep failing like this?

Failing Gabriel

Failing Overwatch

Failing himself

*Why*

Why did he keep failing like this

*Why*

Why couldn’t he do anything right

He curls up around the heavy pulse rifle, fighting back the agony twisting like a lobotomizing drill into his brain, piercing holes into his security, lathing him with weaknesses and filling them with fear - such fear, such blinding, painful, crippling fear - like that could replace the grey matter being suctioned out -

He wants existence itself to end

He wants the world to stop again
He wants his existence to end
He wants his world to stop
He sits there, old, useless, broken, ugly -

“In Japan, we have this art called 金継ぎ - kintsugi,” the cyborg says to him slowly, as they watch the waves roll and crash into the cliffs below. His electronically enhanced voice is still struggling with conveying a full range of emotions, but Jack thinks

Jack thinks he sounds heartbroken.

“It is the art of taking a broken plate, or a broken bowl, and fixing them with lacquer of gold,” the cyborg continues, his tone wavering and shivering and breaking like the waves against rocks, “And it enhances the beauty of the plate or bowl because even though it was broken, now it is beautiful. It has gold in the cracks and it looks better than it once did.”

He pauses, lifting his half-mask towards the sunset over the Mediterranean, dark eyes almost red with the swell of the sunset, before his next words tear at Jack’s heart, shattering it:

“I keep looking for the gold between my pieces...but I do not find it.”

He cannot find his gold either, not in his useless, broken pieces, nor in his useless, shredded skin, nor in his useless, aching joints, nor in his useless, throbbing trachea, nor in his useless, broken heart -

But there had been gold.

There had been glittering streams of gold and red and gold and amber around Gabriel, like the soft dusting of galactic stars and space clouds dancing around him, drifting about him like a haze of a dusky morning -

And there had been that same gold, glittering and shimmering and shivering around the sunstar of smoke in Jack’s hospital room that day -

He opens his eyes -

He is tired of waiting
He is tired of searching
He is tired of hoping
Hoping that he will eventually find his gold.
Fuck that nonsense.

With superhuman effort
He soldiers on.

He slides a hand to one of his chest pockets, jerks the flap open, and digs out some bandages. Fuck, he might even have to do stitches in his neck later, how the fuck had Gabriel not cut one of his major blood vessels, his claws (and fucking claws, really, Gabriel?) had been all over his neck, must’ve been a damn miracle they hadn’t cut a jugular -

He puts his pieces back together, not with gold, but with bandage wraps and nanoboosters and scars
and maybe even stitches later.

Even as his soul yearns for the gold to bind him together

He knows he does not have that privilege.

Gold is for beautiful pottery held together with glitter and gleam, for beautiful people broken at their seams, for beings made of stardust and smoke and dreams -

He is tired of waiting

He is tired of searching

He is tired of hoping

Because gold will not be what holds him together when he finally uncovers the truth.

It will be bandage wraps and nanoboosters and scars and sheer fucking force of will.

Even as the doubts creep in and pierce his brain and break his heart down further,

He has nothing else.

Nothing but bandage wraps and nanoboosters and scars.

But fuck lying down and dying in a ditch somewhere.

Fuck growing old and lost and sad alone without his Gabriel, made of shotgun smoke and sunshine and stupid smiles and gold -

He will drag Gabriel back kicking and screaming if he has to.

And he will put Gabriel’s pieces back together.

He has no gold to offer him, but fuck it -

Maybe the gold isn’t keeping Gabriel’s pieces together.

Maybe Gabriel needs bandages and nanoboosters and scars too.

And Jack

He can’t offer much

Because he has nothing else

But he can offer that.

When the lithe, bright purple hacker slips back into the Panorama Diner, the soldier is sitting in one of the booths, scrolling through his datapad, heavy pulse rifle resting at his side, the bandages around his neck drying with blood, and he casually rolls his head towards her, as if she's a mild inconvenience, and he rises from his seat, hoisting up the rifle with languid ease, before pointing it at her:

“Es hora por la verdad, mija.”
Even though the adrenaline is still pumping strong in her veins, Fareeha places a calm hand on the white, round bomb on the hover carrier.

It’s over.

Well...it’s not really.

“...So what now?” Mahmud asks her, and Saleh gives her an uncertain look as well. Fareeha just glares at the fusion bomb, her own, rounded, polished reflection staring back. It was one thing attempting to secure it, to stop it from advancing, to keep it in one spot.

It was another thing to get it out of the gorge itself.

“We have no train,” Fareeha says to them, “The American soldiers are dead, our backup won’t arrive for another five minutes, we have three injured - one severely.”

“We cannot...fly it out?” Mahmud asks, and Saleh, surprisingly, replies, “Hover carriers can get over all sorts of terrain, but they cannot fly more than a meter off the ground at best.”

Fareeha turns to them and scowls, asking, “So we are stuck here?”

Saleh shrugs, “We could bring it back to the wreckage, but there’s not much else we can do until the U.S. military arrives with the means to either put it on another train or a truck to take it out of here.”

Fareeha shifts her gaze between the two of them, mumbling, “Do we know how many more Deadlock members are here?” Saleh shakes his head and Mahmud suddenly looks uncertain, saying, “Lieutenant, I do not know if you saw this, but there was this electrical pulse - ”

“Are you really gonna do this?” a deep voice calls out over the stillness of the gorge, and the Helix team looks up to the south cliff, where -

The Talon squad has gathered.

“OH ALLAH,” Saleh swears, and Fareeha points her rocket launcher in their direction and -

The ghost-man in black - The Reaper, she remembers Winston saying - just rolls his head a little, sighing, “Seriously, are we gonna have to incapacitate all of your team before you figure out you’ve lost?”

“One of my rockets could take out all of you right now,” Fareeha snaps at him, and he just stares down at her, his expression hidden by that damn skull mask, before saying, “Listen, I fucking love violence as much as the next asshole, but I’m really fucking tired of this, okay? I don’t even like Deadlock, I’m just getting paid to do this.”

“So run off with your tail between your legs, dog,” Mahmud shouts at him, and the man sighs again, saying, “You know the bomb is fucking useless right now, right?”

Fareeha scowls, muttering up at him, “Explain.”
“Someone used an EMP on it right before you got here with that...rocket attack thing you did,” he says, gesturing at it with a shotgun. Fareeha frowns, glancing at Saleh, who shrugs, and Mahmud whispers, “I was trying to say, Lieutenant - there was an energy blast right before we returned. Nearly knocked out my ability to fly.”

“Really?” she whispers back to him, “How is the hover carrier still standing?”

“Hover carriers are propulsion and solar-powered, their electric circuits are designed to withstand knockouts,” Saleh explains, “They were invented during the Crisis, when the Omnis were dropping EMPs left and right, so they’re incredibly insulated and will resist almost all forms of electric pulses. The only reason Mexico didn’t suffer worse from La Medianoche is because Overwatch brought in thousands of hover carriers to distribute supplies.”

“You know a lot about this,” Fareeha whispers to him, and Saleh shrugs, murmuring, “I am still a mechanic and engineer for Helix - I work on carriers all the time. It’s also why that thing wasn’t damaged in the crash.”

Fareeha chews on her lip a bit, before shouting up to the Talon squad, “Why tell us that? We would have returned it broken to the U.S. military.”

“Because literally neither your group nor my group actually gives a shit about this bomb,” the man yells back, “I mean, seriously, if you wanna haul it back to the wreck, fucking knock your socks off, kid, but there’s still like twenty-something Deadlock members in that base and they’ll be out here before your military support arrives, so really, why hurt yourselves trying?”

“He’s got a point,” Mahmud mutters and Fareeha hisses at them, “Is this really a gamble you want to risk?”

“I know I do not want to lose any more of our team,” Mahmud shoots back at her and Fareeha feels that angry, bitter frustration in her.

The man
Or the mission.

“...Aizad needs to get to a hospital,” Saleh whispers to her, “As soon as he can. If we hurry, we could probably take him to the nearest town and get him help.”

Fareeha shuts her eyes, squeezing out the light of the world and looking only at the darkness behind her eyelids.

Her mother would say to take Aizad to a hospital.

The Strike-Commander who left her mother behind would -

Jack would say the same thing.

The lives of twenty soldiers and scientists had weighed more than the life of Ana Amari.

Getting them to safety had meant more than jeopardizing all of them just to crawl through rubble and rocket blasts and sniper fire to find her dead.

*Rein*, she thinks softly, in the darkness behind her eyes, *Rein, what would you say?*

She thinks she can feel his large hand pressing reassuringly on her shoulder.
She thinks she can hear his voice, normally so large and loud and booming, but in here, in the quiet darkness behind her eyes, his voice is soft, gentle, serene, like when he used to carry her tiny form to bed, humming a lullaby in his chest:

“Justice es doing ze right zhing. I believe you will do ze right zhing, Kleine.”

Aizad needs a blood transplant.

The nanoboosters will only do so much, but even they cannot restore all the blood he’s lost.

Aizad needs a hospital.

Fareeha opens her eyes, letting the hard sunlight back in.

“Fine,” she says firmly, “We’re leaving. Where is the nearest town?”

“Head north up the road - you’ll reach the highway to Santa Fe from there. You’re probably gonna have to fly but,” the man shrugs a little, “I’m rooting for you, halcónita.”

“...Thank you, Reaper,” she says to him, as genuinely as she can -

“Holy shit, does literally EVERYONE know who I am?” he snaps, his good will dissolving almost instantaneously as he rounds on some of the Talon members, “Oi, Inigo, did you know who I was before we met?”

“I, uh - we had been informed of you, sir, but - ”

“Jesus fucking Christ, I am the worst kept secret, huh?” Reaper groans to himself and some members of his Talon squad...giggle a little? Fareeha cannot help but oggle them as they mill about like normal humans - rude, sure, but...normal. Beside her, Saleh and Mahmud gawk as well, when suddenly -

“Hey, fuckers, I’m still here.”

Fareeha whips back around as a huge, mountain of a man lumbers out of the north door of the gas station, hefting a rocket launcher over his shoulder. He’s covered in tattoos, but his beard and shaved head are surprisingly neatly trimmed, although he is covered in dust and ash and soot, looking like he just walked through a burning house. Fareeha tenses, aiming her rocket launcher at him in response, and Saleh and Mahmud take defensive positions, their hands on their throttles, ready to fly. The man cracks his neck and out of her peripherals, Fareeha spots a smaller man pop his head out of the doorway, squeak a little, and then jerk himself back inside.

“You think I’m just gonna let you walk away from this?” the man growls at them, “After the shit you did to my gang? I don’t think so, motherfuckers.” He hoists the rocket launcher towards them and behind her, she distantly hears the Reaper swear something. The man gives them a huge, vicious grin, snarling, “Hope you’re ready to meet your damn Allah, you sons of bitches - ”

There’s the echoing ring of a shot being fired, and a bullet rips out of the man’s forehead, that malicious grin still plastered on his face, even as he falls face forward into the pavement, dead.

Saleh yelps and Mahmud jerks back but Fareeha is scanning the road before them and she swears -

She swears she sees someone move in the shadows of the tunnel before disappearing into the darkness.
“Uh…well, shit,” Reaper shouts out behind them, “I mean, I’m glad he’s dead and all, but...holy fuck.”

“We’re uh…we’re gonna go then,” Fareeha shouts back to him and the Reaper replies, “Uh...yeah, that’s cool, I guess. He wasn’t my boss.”

Fareeha gestures back to the ledge where Okoro is taking care of Aizad, and her team rushes off to return to them.

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**Sharpshooter: Route 66 - Victory**

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 9:07 a.m. - the wreckage site

Well, well, well.

Turns out being slow has its perks.

Sure, he was lagging super hard behind the soldier and Sombra - wherever she was - but, fuckin’ hell, it had given Jesse the time to put a bullet in Terry’s head and that was the end of that.

God, he ain’t supposed to feel happy about killin’ people

But removing evil men from the face of the earth felt good.

_I suppose I’ll be seein’ you in hell, Hernandez, you rat bastard, but yer gonna be there long before me_, Jesse thinks viciously to himself, although he supposes there’s technically no guarantee of the second part of that.

Jesse half-jogs, half-trots through the still-smoking wreckage of the train cars and smashed crates, puffing on his cigar in a surprisingly good mood. They had disabled the bomb, he gotta kill a few bad people, gotta throw a flashbang, and gotta put an end to his miserable ol’ fuck of a boss.

Not bad for a Wednesday morning before 9:30 a.m.

He hops over a broken box, spurs jangling as he clacks his boots back down, jogs up the central stairs into the center doors of the diner, rounds the hallway and -

The soldier is standing in the corner of the diner, pointing his rifle at Sombra, who is holding her hands up in what Jesse assumes is a partially-genuine, partially-mocking display of humility.

Aw, fuck.

This shit again.

In truth, Jesse’s got a bone to pick with the ol’ soldier.

Considering, ya know, he’d shot Jesse at a critical point in the operation.

“...Looks like I walked in at a bad time,” Jesse drawls, but his eyes never leave the rifle in the soldier’s hands, “Guess I should just wait a moment?”

The soldier lolls his head in Jesse’s direction, and Jesse can see that there are bloody bandages
wrapped around his neck. Jesse’s dark eyes narrow at that - perhaps that fucking...dude in all black had done more damage than he’d thought.

“I thought you wanted to know the truth too,” the soldier says to him, his words slow and confident but slightly...slurred, like he’s a little bit drunk or somethin’, and Jesse wonders if he’d lost more blood than it seemed.

“...Well, I sure do, partner, but maybe holdin’ her up at gunpoint ain’t the best way to go about it,” Jesse replies, pulling his cigar from his mouth and tapping the ash on the heel of his boot. The soldier languidly turns his head back towards her, taking several steps forward and not lowering his rifle.

“That man - the one in the gorge, the one in all black - you had a picture of him,” the soldier says coldly as he approaches Sombra and Sombra -

Her eyes light up with a vicious, dangerous glow.

A wide, wicked smile spreads on her face.

That was not the reaction Jesse was expecting.

“How long have you known about him?” the soldier demands, the end of his rifle only a few inches away from her heart now, and he looms over her with his massive figure, the glow of his visor eerie in the half-dusk of the diner, “Where did you get that footage? Is there more? What do you know about the Geneva explosion?”

Jesse scowls at the line of questioning, and glances at Sombra.

Her expression hasn’t changed - that uncanny, cruel smile is still plastered to her face, lit by the red glow of the soldier’s visor and by the pinkish-purple glow of her biopanels.

Her left hand taps at several small pink-purple buttons in midair and her holo-projection lights up:

The footage is shaky, old, rocketing through the sky with the whirring of small propulsion thrusters in the background - it rattles over old, square buildings with rounded corners and debris in the streets. The sunlight is a harsh orange glow - sunset, perhaps, late into the evening. There’s gunfire in the background and a familiar voice cuts into the recording -

“Where’s the shooter?” Jack Morrison’s voice barks over the drone’s intercom, “Ana, report!”

“Looking!”

The voice cuts like a knife through Jesse’s heart, and he stares wide-eyed at Sombra, who is still smirking, her eyes never leaving the soldier...and the soldier’s red gaze never leaves hers.

More shots are fired in the recording, as the drone whirls around and around, searching, searching -

“I’ve been engaged!” Ana Amari’s voice cuts into the drone’s feed, “Changing position!”

There’s a pause, more shooting, then -

“Everyone good?” Ana calls out, when more shouts fill the air and Jack’s voice cuts through, “Ana, can you get a handle on this shooter??”

“Pretty sure there’s two,” Ana says, her voice filled with adrenaline even though she sounds relatively calm.
“I’ve been hearing chatter about a new Talon sniper, moves like lightning - this could be him,” Jack says, also sounding rather breathless.

The drone hovers over a pink, multi-storied building and Ana orders, “Morrison, pink building, third floor, corner window! Break when you see impact!”

The drone dives at the corner window, the camera zooming in, the lens focusing on a dark figure who manages to bolt away and -

The feed cuts out.

There’s silence as the holo-projection flickers to a blank screen of rolling pink static, and the three of them

The three of them stare at each other in silence.

“...That’s not the Geneva explosion,” the soldier says coldly, cruelly, his voice cutting like broken glass, and Sombra tilts her head a little, still smiling, saying quietly, just as cruelly, “This is the Geneva explosion. This is where it started.”

Jesse frowns, glaring at her, snapping, “What? No - this is when Ana Amari died!”

Sombra rolls her dark, violet eyes towards him, and flashes her teeth, snapping:

“...Did she?”

The cigar drops from Jesse’s mouth as the barrel of the soldier’s rifle actually touches Sombra’s chest, and he rumbles, “Explain yourself.”

“Hmm...No, no están listos (tn: no, you are not ready),” Sombra chuckles and Jesse snaps, truly, vividly angry:

“DON’T FUCK WITH US, HERMANA - YOU PROMISED US THE TRUTH AND YOU CAN’T JUST - CAN’T JUST DANGLE THIS SHIT IN FRONT OF US AND DENY IT TO US.”

Sombra giggles - she fuckin’ giggles, “Now, now, vaquero, I’ll tell you two someday - de esta, sé certero - but you...you are not ready.”

“We had a deal, pendeja,” the soldier snarls, and she grins at him, eyes glowing red with the light of his visor, and she laughs - fuckin’ laughs, “Amigo, how can you face the truth when you can’t even face a ghost?”

The soldier jerks back, before snapping at her, “DON’T FUCK WITH ME, HOW THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW??”

“Are you afraid of ghosts, soldado?” she chides him, not backing down, her eye still uncanny in the strange light of his visor, and with everything glowing off of her, she looks...otherworldly, unnatural -

Inhuman.

Sombra cackles, “Me? I’m not afraid of ghosts. Shadows never fear the dark. When you know what I know, monsters can’t scare you anymore - not when there are bigger dangers out there.” She reaches her hands into her jacket and Jesse’s good hand automatically hovers over his revolver -
But she pulls out two cards between each index and middle finger and snaps them in their directions. The soldier does not let go of his rifle, but jerks towards Jesse to take his, and reluctantly, the cowboy lifts the card from her fingers.

“Mira, neither of you are ready for the truth - ”

It’s a card for LumériCo’s CEO Guillermo Portero.

“Yes, but I’m so nice that I’ve given you not one, but two clues today. *Tienen suertes,*” she laughs, and then flicks the other card in the soldier’s face. He doesn’t move, doesn’t flinch, but Jesse watches as his chest rises and falls with anger.

Sombra’s eyes glint as she looks between the two of them, smirking, “*Relajarse, amigos,* this is not goodbye. I’m sure we’ll see each other again - ”

“Wait, what?” Jesse asks and the soldier belatedly snaps out a hand -

But Sombra vanishes, and something invisible shoves Jesse aside, and he’s flailing wildly, trying to grab at her, and there’s a distant laughter of, “*Hasta luego, pendejos!*” from down the hallway and out into the sunlight.

The soldier shouts something that isn’t really either English or Spanish and bolts after her, darting out into the heat and the sun and Jesse stands there, blinking a few times in surprise, before glancing over the card again.

LumériCo currently has six major operation sites.

Jesse hums a little to himself before pocketing the card and reaching for his cigar case.

Looks like it’s time to head to México.

--------

A birth and a death on the same day  
And honey, I only appear so I can fade away  
I wanna throw my hands in the air and scream,  
And I can just die laughing on your spiral of shame,

And there’s a jet black crow droning on and on and on  
Up above our heads droning on and on and on  
Hit it, never quit it, I have been through the wreck  
But I can string enough to show my face in the light again -

There’s a room in a hotel in New York City  
That shares our fate and deserves our pity  
I don’t want to remember it all  
The promises I made, if you just hold on  
Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on
No way was I gonna ACTUALLY write a full payload push - are you insane?

Reaper may have gotten POTG, but imo, Sombra's the one you actually upvote at the end.

There were no healers or tanks in this battle, hmm.

---

I've always found scenarios where Reaper and Soldier: 76 have a long and fulfilling chat about their lives and traumas during their first encounter to be a bit...unrealistic. If you thought your lifelong partner was dead or had left YOU for dead...well, I imagine you'd feel some pretty complex emotions on seeing them for the first time after that.

Buckle up, kids.

The ride's only just begun.
Chapter Summary

[SSO Declassified File No. 1]
[Accessing from: 01.JULY.2076]
[Accessing from: [Terminal Unknown] in Dorado, Mexico]

[Internal description: Reactions to the Battle of Route 66 in Deadlock Gorge recorded among [Name Encrypted], [Name Encrypted], [Name Encrypted], [Name Encrypted], and [Name Encrypted]. The five SSO members discuss their options for dealing with the failed mission, [Soldier.76], and [The.Reaper].]

[Additional Notes: Not my finest hack job, but it worked.]

[Additional Notes: why did you feel the need to include that]

[Additional Notes: unlike you, some of us take pride in our jobs, boss.]

Chapter Notes

Me, four months ago when I wrote this chapter: I wonder how AO3 handles emojis.

Me, last night uploading the chapter: oh...it doesn't.

I did what I could to preserve the spirit of this, okay. ;_;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moira’s notes to self

2 March 2070

There are only two known ways to kill the so-called “Death agents”: fusion blasts big enough to obliterate their self-regenerating biology, and each other.

So...what killed Yamamoto? What is Shimada hiding from me? Is it related to whatever happened to his brother a few days ago? I told him not to make any changes without my knowledge. And why will no one tell me what happened to Genji? He was qualified to receive the necessary enhancements and yet he just disappeared? Today I was turned away at the gate to the Shimada compound without so much as an explanation.

This is why I hate working with “family businesses” - too many emotions involved to make calm, levelheaded, rational decisions.
Yet another failed opportunity. I guess it’s back to the drawing board.

As for my next steps...I don’t know.

I have received an offer from Ibrahim to join him and a few others in a new, artificial city in Iraq. He claims there will be no restrictions on experimentation in the city, and that I could quickly find backers and patrons for my research. I am debating joining him, but at the moment, the city has only just begun construction, and it will likely take several more years before completion (something about damming up a wadi to create an artificial lake?). Otherwise, that Big Evil Pharma Company has said they would let me do research for them, but obviously they don’t permit free experimentation and I just hate bureaucratic red tape bogging down my scientific processes.

Also, they are obviously Big and Evil and I’m not about to sell out for quick cash.

Morality is a fraud, true, and it always changes with the era, but conducting research to rob the poor blind for a few simple pills is just...vile.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most enticing offer has been from Ogundimu, but he has acknowledged that there will be almost no money involved, complicating my ability to do unrestricted research. I have already had several good exchanges with the CIA agent Guerra, whom Ogundimu says he has “associations with” - whatever that means, I hate when businessmen muck around with the flow of science, but Guerra has said that Ogundimu’s interests in my work are actually purer and have greater integrity than one might think. A mercenary army leader interested in my genetic research? A fascinating puzzle here…

The downside is that there is - how did they put it - “potentially some difficult work” involved. I don’t know what that means, but I reiterated that anything they see on my CV and all the “unpublished” drafts I have sent them represent myself to my greatest capacities. If they expect some sort of other work from me, they will have to disclose that. It has been nearly two decades since I was last a true combat medic, so they better not expect me to chase after Ogundimu down the streets of Numbani when he conducts his next raid.

They did say it had something to do with Overwatch? But surely they know that Overwatch shut down my Dublin laboratory three years ago? I do know both Ogundimu and Guerra are somehow opposed to Overwatch, which only increases my interest in working with them, but as I wrote, I’m far from a combat medic these days (although I have been hearing rumors circulate about some sort of in-production modified dart rifle that shoots nanobot serums, but everything I’ve heard is that it’s some sort of Blackwatch manufacture? I wouldn’t touch it if true).

In any case, they have given me the opportunity to speak with Ogundimu in person, so I suppose I will decide then.

Edit: random tangent - I am pleasantly surprised to hear the Green Turing Project is reaching its groundbreaking in London, although I still believe that “separate communities” for the King’s Row Omnics is such a...backwards plan for them. And it’s not like improved housing and resources really gets to the heart of the problems plaguing the London and British Omnics...although I suppose Dublin is not much better in that regard. It does pain me to see such suffering and mistreatment.

And of course, the “great defender of Omnic rights” - Overwatch - is nowhere to be found in all this.

I should remember to bring this up to Ogundimu - he has such a hatred for Numbani, but from what I have heard he has defended unincorporated Omnic communities on the fringes of Nigeria from junker and scrapper attacks?
An intriguing contradiction, he is.

------

**Saoi: A New Methodology**

Wednesday, 1 July 2076: 21:13 hours - Personal office of the Minister of Genetics, Genetics Department in the City Center, Oasis, Iraq

She’s in the middle of double-checking a report on a new method of genetic rejuvenative therapy by one of her lab assistants when -

“*Comhairle (corle, council). Anois (anish, now).”*

Rings out in a cool, artificial tone from her smartdesk speakers.

Moira pauses mid-sentence, lifting her eyes to scowl darkly at the small, bland blip of a message box that has popped up in the corner of one of her monitors. The soft, blue glow of the box appears to ebb and flow faintly, the intensity of the color fading a little just to flicker back to full brightness, then fade again.

Moira rolls her eyes, glancing back towards the large windows that face west towards the rest of the city of Oasis, running the perimeter of the massive, artificial lagoon. The long, jagged, unfinished tower of the University knifes into the air at the far edge, rising through the sky like a scar. Here, in her own private office along the edge of the city center, the world is steeped in a growing twilight, with the buildings of Oasis glimmering like jewels beneath the deepening stars in the blue darkness, true to its name and all the gilded imagery it inspires in the mind’s eye. Oasis casts its own shimmering haze, light pollution mixed with the stirring of an artificial breeze mixed with a watery mist that rises from the lagoon’s surface - an appearance that all who visit the city find enchanting, beautiful, and spellbinding beneath all hours of the day and night, the sky merely a canvas for the city to paint its artistry upon.

It is in the dim hours of the growing, astronomical twilight - when the very last rays of sunlight are disappearing behind the edges of the city made of steel and silk and science - when Moira finds her mind runs the smoothest, the sweetest, the smartest.

And she does **not** like for that to be interrupted.

Period.

Moira flicks the fingers of her right hand past her half-full glass of whiskey on the rocks, to press the tip of her long index finger to the Enter button on her virtual keyboard. The message box blips with: [Replying] and Moira rasps out, words dryer than her alcohol:

“I’m **working.**”

She lifts her finger, letting the message go back to the original sender, her long fingers drifting back to the glass of whiskey. She lets her eyes fall back to the paper on her datapad, scrolling with her left fingers to flick to the next page, lifting the glass to her lips when -

“**Anois.**”

Her computer AI chimes blandly.
Moira pauses, shutting her eyes like she’s grimacing in true pain, as the mere thought of interacting with the other members of the council right at this exact moment irritates her, the rim of the glass hovering just at the edge of her lips. Her left fingers rub tenderly at the tense muscles on her left temple, before she presses the rim of the glass to her mouth -

And downs the rest of the whiskey.

It burns smooth and slow, like liquid silk in her gut, mingling with her spark of frustration and her ever-present determination to do things and do things right. Moira taps the glass back on the smartdesk screen, the ice clinking and clanking like small chimes, and she snaps out, “Modh glas (lock mode).”

Immediately, the electronic shaders on her windows shift, darkening the room and blocking out her office from any wandering eyes. The AI in her computer chirps back its assent, and then turns itself and her main operating system off, saving all her work and programs in a suspended computing state, before the automated program switches over to:

[SSO Mode: ON].

Moira clicks off the datapad, twisting her rolling chair back towards the monitors. Along with the two physical screens, six extra displays - all holographic - are projected around the other two: two to the side, two above, and two in the corners. As Moira reaches for her bottle of whiskey to refill her glass, the six screens all light up bright purple at the same time, all with the same symbol:

Sevatores Super Omnes.

The Watchers Over All.

Those wretched assholes who don’t appreciate hard work.

Moira pours the whiskey into the glass, sighing to herself as she absently watches the eye fade in and out, much like the message box she’d received, preparing herself for the worst of her fellow “leaders”’ personalities.

If they’re calling a meeting now, then this must be serious, Moira thinks, recapping the bottle, but she rolls her eyes over the “serious” part - just about any little “mistake” could send half of the leaders into a frenzy as the other half yawned and complained about a lack of sleep or muttered “do you know what time it is here?”

As the computer connects to the heavily encrypted SSO network, the purple eye logos fade out, with the regular screens loading up. Moira leans back, drawing her whiskey glass to her chest, staring at the streams of codes and message boxes that start to appear, before they flicker out -

And the “standard” bullshit begins.

First things first: the four “central” monitors show the three main “speakers” plus some sort of...awkward, shaky body cam footage? Moira scowls - much like old school video calls, the “speakers” are visible to whatever cameras are hooked up on their computers, but only two of the three are actually willing to show their visages at this moment:

Vialli, the reckless chancer, rolling his eyes and sighing dramatically, as per usual -

Guerra, the old war dog, looking bitter and furious, as per usual -

And the scrambled, garbled “image” of Seti, the president of Helix Securities -
Hiding his face.

As per usual.

Along the two right “outside” screens, several smaller “connected feeds” appear - the vast majority of them are also scrambled or pixelated or blacked out, with many of the Servatores preferring to hide their faces, even from each other. Moira shakes her head a little.

They don’t do it for fear of mistrust and betrayal, nor as a personal identity precaution.

They do it because they’re 

vain as all hell.

No one cares what you look like at two in the morning, Petras, Moira titters to herself, taking a sip from her second glass of whiskey as she eyes the totally subtle scrambled image of the former Overwatch director in one of the corners - his location is given as somewhere in St. Petersburg, no doubt visiting his friend Volskaya and oohing and aahing over her factories. Among the boxes, she spots Korpal’s located in Numbani, and wonders, Oh my, Sanjay - you actually have time to join us for this one?

On the left two “outside” screens, more important, more useful boxes pop up: the encrypted, safeguarded transcript, a terribly useful little application that instantaneously transcribes and documents all statements made while blocking out names and locations before it downloads a copy to a secure archival location; a message box stating the “purpose” of this particular meeting, along with brief details on the who, what, where, when, and why; and then sections for private, one-on-one conversations any other members want to have with her in particular.

Almost immediately, one of these private conversations blinks into existence, the label reading:

[[Maximilien Robespierre] has sent a private chat.]

Moira reaches out and taps the holographic blip with the tip of her left index finger, and a small box with the Omnic banker’s face opens up. It’s not quite as late in Monaco as it is in Oasis, and Moira can spot some brighter rays of the late afternoon sunshine filtering into Maximilien’s expensive but rather sophisticated lounge. Moira flickers her finger to the main “council” group conversation, where Vialli is starting to say something, and mutes her own “microphone” over there.

“Let me guess,” she states blithely to Maximilien, “Something went wrong with Deadlock, did it?”

“As perceptive as ever,” Maximilien replies drolly, and she watches as he lifts a glass of his own “alcohol” - some sort of warped Omnic oil - to his faceplate. Before he “drinks,” the Omnic banker shakes his head, his deep electronic tones rumbling dryly, “But this may not play out how you want it to, O’Deorain.”

Does anything ever? Moira asks herself wryly, turning her attention back to the main conversation.

But the beauty of science lay not in “playing games flawlessly -”

But in “experimenting with ideas and actions imperfectly.”

“- For the last time,” Vialli states flippantly in the main conversation, “Deadlock requested the use of the sniper, and I merely agreed with that request -”

“That is not the issue here, Vialli!” Guerra practically snarls, his aging face contorting with outright fury. Vialli looks completely undaunted, but it is Seti who takes over, hissing with bitter, poisonous rage:
“The mercenary you sent with her nearly left a massacre in his wake!”

This.

This transforms Moira’s lukewarm frustration to ice-chilled, whiskey-fueled fear.

WHAT, she thinks, her eyes darting to the fourth box, where the shaky body cam footage clips over and over. She quickly deduces it must be from one of the American soldiers sent to help transport the LumériCo fusion bomb - the individual is rushing towards the bomb, strapped to a hover carrier that’s lingering before a massive, closed gate built into a sandstone wall. The soldier points their pulse rifle at some tattooed, leather-clad Deadlock grunt of a man in front of them, and fires one-two-three quick pulse shots into his chest.

But before the man even hits the pavement of the road -

A long trail of jet-black, thick smoke drifts over the fusion bomb.

Oh.

It congeals and takes shape.

God.

From the smoke, he appears, drawing out two large, long, jet-black shotguns.

Dammit.

And then “Reaper” starts to alight.

Lethal, furious shots of burning red fire whip out of his twisting, snaking, swirling form, as the smoke and blaze dance around him. The soldier wearing the body cam drops to the ground almost instantly, the view shifting to a shot of the bright blue sky above, as distant, indistinct shouts rattle and shake the air around them -

Only for more livid fire to shatter the sounds with screams.

Moira exhales heavily -

And presses her left fingers to her temple in utter frustration.

“What the hell,” Vialli says, almost shouting over the footage and the other two main speakers, “Guerra, this was your idea! You wanted Deadlock to get the bomb, and they got it! You knew the American soldiers would take the fall -”

“And this wasn’t meant to be an experiment, pinche idiota,” Marc Guerra growls back, his dark eyes gleaming viciously in the light of his CIA office. He points an actual finger at the camera, saying with such bitterness that Moira can taste it, even virtually, “This was not a mission for you and Robospierre to play around with your new toys -”

On the private screen, Maximilien taps a microphone on his collar, stating bluntly and unapologetically, “Monsieur Guerra, I did not approve of this plan. In truth, I am also very frustrated with these choices.”

He releases the button and the reactions are immediate - Vialli looks hurt, almost betrayed, Guerra looks smug and victorious, and Seti’s blur of an image blurs out with, “Well, well, Vialli .”
“Still playing the neutral card, are you?” Moira asks Maximilien. In his private conversation screen, she watches him roll his shoulders apathetically, saying calmly, “The ‘ands we ‘ave been dealt are starting to change again, O’Deorain - surely you can see that too.”

Oh -

Moira knows all about “changing hands.”

Moira flicks her eyes to the repeating clip of “Reaper” gunning down the American soldiers, over and over and over again.

The body cam on the soldier cannot see it, but Moira knows -

Oh, how she knows -

Gabriel Reyes is draining the life from every living creature around him in that moment.

These changes in him are...almost impossible, she surges internally, her chest heaving, right fingers twitching slightly around the whiskey glass, where her nerves and biosynthetic implants seem to shudder on their own impulses -

As if they can sense - from her thoughts alone - the man whose unlimited potential she crafted them from.

Prior to the explosion, his charts, his data, his potential had seemed almost impossible even then - even when he had just been “Gabriel Reyes -”

No, Moira corrects herself, grimacing over her own internal mistake, He was always “Reaper.” He has always been “Reaper.”

But not like this.

It was true that “Gabriel Reyes” had possessed some sort of...remarkable energy regenerating ability, something he had come to her about, seeking “help” on “improving” and “enhancing” it. But in their “experiments,” in which Moira had pushed and pressed and pained his body into developing a reaction -

Drawing out the breath of life energy - raw, pure, never seen in such a state of existence before - from the test subjects around him -

Nothing like this had ever occurred on such a scale.

Of course, he also hid most of the truth from you, Moira reminds herself tartly, opening her eyes, scowling bitterly at “Reaper” on the screen, He could have always possessed this ability.

She doubts it, however.

She has seen Gabriel Reyes at his weakest, most broken, most devastated points -

And he had not done this.

Drawn energy from those around him? Yes.

But annihilated a whole squad or platoon with his own unstable energy as he stole every drop of their lives?
As far as she knew, he had not even drained the life of Jack Morrison during the Geneva explosion, which they had been certain would force Reyes to destroy the Strike-Commander -

Resulting in one of two outcomes:

The explosion pushing Reyes’ unique mutations to truly unlock their full potentials, with him leaching the “enhanced” life energy from Jack Morrison, resulting in Gabriel Reyes becoming the first truly immortal, truly indestructible multicellular, sentient, intelligent organism on Earth - proof that humanity could break free from the shackles of Time and Death Themselves -

Or -

That Reyes would draw enough energy from Jack Morrison to propel Morrison’s own unique mutations into activating -

Resulting in not one, but two semi-immortal, semi-indestructible human beings.

Moira glares at the screen.

For the last six years, she had thought that neither of those had happened, that Gabriel had somehow escaped Geneva with only his original “enhancements” to help him survive, falling back on an old alias and persona to cover his tracks and let him act as he always had (albeit with more...black leather than she had expected).

For the last six years -

She had thought she had failed to get any results.

But now?

Moira watches Reaper shoot and twist and revel in his own existence, and her right hand tenses at the sight alone.

The “Ascendance” result may have actually occurred.

Alright, O’Deorain, Moira breathes to herself, recollecting her whirring, grinding thoughts, trying to put them into an organized, efficient process that she could actually follow instead of boundless leaping from one over-excited, slightly fearful panicky idea to the next. Focus. The first thing we need to do is get Reaper in the lab without anyone else knowing. Take samples and do the basic tests. Let him go back to Zaragoza before it gets suspicious. Vialli has lost much of his touch, but Maximilien will notice if a Death Agent mercenary as high profile as Reaper is going in and out of Oasis routinely.

And it’s not just Maximilien - the other Ministers of Oasis will undoubtedly pick up on an “outsider” like Reaper entering and exiting her lab on a regular basis, and she doesn’t trust half of them with steeping her tea, let alone her research.

No, she will have to be...flexible about managing this post-explosion research on Reyes. Secretive. Quiet. Stealthy.

It isn’t that she cannot do these things - rather that, when she focuses on work, it gets difficult to
focus her energies on anything else. She already knows she’s slipped up on a few things in front of Reaper the other day, but he either missed them (unlikely, though anger and heartbreak did always blind him to reason and rationality) or he let them slide (more likely), probably thinking he could pocket one or two of them to put in whatever...game he was playing (or whatever game he believed he was playing).

The hardest person to keep this from will be Guerra, Moira assesses, switching her gaze back to the 67-year-old CIA agent. Despite his age, almost nothing about Marc Guerra has faded with the years - his amber-toned skin is still lustrous, almost unbearably healthy, with his dark hair peppered with streaks of grey. But his eyes - dark as the abyss, as fierce as an eagle’s - remain piercingly sharp, catching every small detail that passes his gaze.

Unsurprising, given that -

“Seti, why are you mad at me?” Vialli says so furiously that he interrupts Moira’s thoughts, “- When you called this meeting to yell at Guerra?”

What?

The whole council falls silent. In their private conversation, Maximilien leans forward, and though his faceplate cannot change expressions, Moira knows he’s concentrating hard.

“What did I do?” Guerra asks with what appears to be genuine shock, “I set up this mission - I convinced Portero to even do this! I supplied the train, and the American soldiers, and relaxed the CIA awareness of it -”

Vialli’s face is uncharacteristically serious as Seti intones bitterly:

“So I supposed this was not part of your plan, Guerra?”

Moira turns her attention to the “camera” screen, where the footage from the American soldier is replaced by...another shaky recording. This one appears to be from one of Helix’s “Raptora” squad members, as the recording comes from about 20 meters off the ground, and the timestamp is also tagged with the ID:

[Lt. Fareeha Amari].

Moira scowls over the name, but is unsurprised - despite “claiming” that he’s keeping tabs on the daughter of Ana Amari, Seti has something of a sentimental weak spot for the Raptora lieutenant, probably because she’s one of the best Mark VI pilots Helix has ever trained.

She represents everything he’s trying to accomplish with those bloody rocket suits, Moira thinks, lifting the glass of whiskey to take a drink. She watches as Fareeha boosts up, over some dilapidated gas station, with the road below her and the closed steel gates to her slight left. Moira can see the bomb on the hover carrier, still waiting there, surrounded by dead American soldiers only that -

Moira scowls.

Reaper is “gone” from the bomb -

And as Fareeha scans the arid ground, both the lieutenant and her “audience” see two figures on the ground, next to some sort of...tunnel entrance into a sandstone cliff. They’re struggling in some sort of fist-fight in the dust, with Reaper’s dark, broad back immediately apparent - thick smoke rises from him, mingling with the red dust and Moira squints to make out who the other individual is beneath him -
Fareeha stops rising mid-flight to hover and -

Seti clicks something, slowing down the clip to half-speed.

The person underneath Reaper manages to knock him away, hurling him towards the tunnel entrance and the cliff, as Fareeha starts to drone something at an unnaturally lower octave -

Reaper tumbles away, and the other person scrambles to their feet, barely keeping their grip on a massive, deep blue gun and -

The man darts forward, towards Fareeha, but around the corner of the gas station as a barrage of rockets is released from Fareeha’s suit -

There’s a fraction of the second where the man’s blurry figure is mostly in view and Seti pauses it there.

Amid the trails of white rocket smoke, Fareeha misses looking directly at him, but the man has barely glanced up towards her, hugging the wall of the gas station and -

Guerra makes an audible sound of strangled horror.

Moira raises an eyebrow in semi-confusion as she looks at the man’s odd...half-face mask and the bright, vividly red screenglass that lights up around his eyes. But her gaze skims down to the very unsubtle, very obvious heavy pulse rifle in his hands and -

“Mother. Fucker,” Guerra hisses as both Vialli and Seti start to say something -

“Who is this?” Moira asks Maximilien, still feeling rather confused, but the Omnic banker actually jumps in surprise at her question, stammering back so hard that his electronic voice processors skip some sounds:

“O’Deorain - have - have you not been read-reading the news??”

“I have been busy,” Moira rasps - between her work in the Genetics lab and helping managing Oasis and dealing with “Reaper” joining Talon, she’s barely had time to keep up on any news outside of local Iraqi and Saudi politics -

“You told us you were handling this situation, Guerra!” Vialli shouts, as Seti snaps, “First one of your experiments steals the heavy pulse rifle, and now he jeopardizes this mission -”

“That is Soldier: 76,” Maximilien says, his voice falling back to normal, leaning back against his plush seat as he adds, “We assume he is one of Guerra’s lost ‘enhanced’ soldiers, now going rogue against the U.S. government and -”

“SOLDIER: 76??”

Maximilien stops mid-sentence as Moira nearly spits the word from her mouth, her eyes darting to the frozen footage, her mind nearly crashing to a halt. Without thinking about it, she’s clattering the whiskey glass down onto the desk next to the bottle, fingers whipping to Maximilien’s private conversation box, gritting out:

“Apologies, Maximilien, but I must speak to Agent Guerra -”

Maximilien starts to make a gesture but Moira closes his conversation, pulling up a new one-on-one conversation box, and rapidly typing out:
She hits send, and then fumes as she watches Guerra listen sullenly to Vialli’s and Seti’s dual-attack:

“You have no right to be mad at me for sending Reaper along when you cannot even control your old SEP soldiers!”

“You told us this man would not be a threat, but look at what he is doing! You need to release his file to us -”

After a second, the private conversation box blinks and Marc’s face appears. On his “main convo” screen, he’s looped a clip of him being furious but silent, but in the new one-on-one conversation that appears between him and Moira, the aging CIA agent looks bitterly and angrily exhausted.

“...I wondered when you would contact me about this,” Marc grumbles, his hands rubbing at his eyes. He sighs, resting his head for a second as he mutters, “Be quick - I have to think of something to say to appease Seti and get Vialli to shove the fuck off -”

“How long.”

Moira’s voice cuts like a steel wire.

She does not miss the irony that she is repeating what Reaper himself said to her only days ago.

Marc remains unmoved, and there’s a long second where nothing happens but -

“...Being completely honest with you, O’Deorain,” Marc exhales, slowly lifting his head from his hands to stare those deep, dark eyes at her, “I only really knew after the break-in at Grand Mesa last week.”

Moira glowers back fiercely, as - with his own gaze stubbornly resolved and determined - Marc admits to her:

“...But some of us knew shortly after Geneva that Morrison was still alive.”

(Because that’s the thing about Marc Guerra’s “unsurprising” youth -)

“You lied to me,” Moira snaps, the fingers of her right hand twitching, as if her anger has given the “enhanced” nerves and biosynthetic implants in them a mind of their own.

(- The CIA agent and ex-‘Soldier Enhancement Program’ director for the United States -)

“I did not lie to you,” Marc retorts with venom in his voice, “We lost track of Morrison’s location almost immediately after the explosion. And the damn asshole hasn’t made a move in six years!”

(- Is just as ‘enhanced’ as his soldiers had been.)

Moira opens her mouth to say something, but Marc shakes his head, muttering, “Hang on - let me respond to the others.” He mutes her conversation and, a fraction of a second later, “Guerra’s main convo” screen returns to normal, with him almost seamlessly moving from the “furious but silent” loop into actual, live replies.

“We are dealing with Soldier: 76,” Guerra says resolutely, “We know he’d been through a handful of towns south of Grand Mesa, but he’s going by different aliases than the name we have on file -”

“Why won’t you let us help with catching him?” Seti asks, jumping straight to the point, “I can put
my best Helix agents on the case and together, Helix and the CIA can take him down quickly -”

“Not going to happen,” Guerra states to Seti, “That heavy pulse rifle is capable of knocking out one of your Mark VI’s in a matter of seconds, even if he doesn’t destroy the pilot’s helmet or hit their weaknesses right away.”

“And you just let him take that weapon?” Vialli demands. Guerra glares at him, muttering, “I’d like to remind you all that Helix guards were the ones manning Watchpoint: Grand Mesa, based on a contract with Helix International Securities that the United Nations agreed to.”

That gets Seti to fall silent, and the whole conversation goes quiet, with Guerra putting on an exaggerated display of rubbing at his eyes, looking very tired and blatantly vulnerable to the whole group.

“...Mira,” Guerra finally sighs, lifting his head again, “All I can do at the moment is reaffirm that we are committed to capturing Soldier: 76 -”

“Why won’t you give us access to the SEP files?”

The conversation goes quiet as - out of the virtual darkness - Petras’ voice rings out like the bang of a shotgun. Guerra keeps a relatively controlled expression, but Moira can immediately sense him tense up and -

*You know what they say,* Moira snarks to herself, *If you want something done right -*

Her right finger flicks to the “microphone button” on the main conversation screens -

*You have to do it yourself.*

“I have looked over the file for Soldier: 76,” Moira states to the entire group.

Marc reacts instantaneously, but subtly, his eyes darting to their still-muted private conversation, but Vialli in the main conversation appears to relax slightly, albeit with a bit of confusion.

“You have?” the Venetian land shark asks. Moira holds down the button, replying calmly, “Indeed, Guerra has been consulting with me on the SEP soldiers that are still alive, and assessing their current health conditions. Soldier: 76 is in remarkable shape, but he is nothing noteworthy...well, until now, I suppose. But that is purely in terms of his political actions, and not his biology.”

Viali frowns a little, but Marc looks a touch relieved.

“The vast majority of the still-living SEP soldiers are nothing special,” Moira continues, as if this is routine for her, “Well, compared to other supersoldiers, of course. Reyes was the last one worthy of any significant focus, and we all know what happened to him. So while Soldier: 76’s biology will...resist death, he does not have the genetic potentials to become a Death Agent.”

“I suppose you have spoken to Reaper about documenting his condition then?” Seti asks, and from the calmer tone of his voice, he seems more and more placated by Moira’s answers.

“Indeed,” Moira affirms, seeing something of a small opportunity here, “As I sent in the message to the council members last week, Reaper is cooperating with Talon now. He has finally seen the benefits that Talon provides its contracted mercenaries, and he is willing to work with my laboratory here in Oasis to help my research on the Death Agents progress.”

“And how is the new Crusader coming along?” Petras asks quietly. Moira opens her mouth to
respond, when a familiar, electronically deep tone replies first:

“The Crusader Death Agent has proven successful,” Maximilien states calmly, “In fact, we will begin deployment later this week. Von Alder has requested a personal mission, one which should be easy and quite simple to accomplish. After that, he should be ready to face the Siberian Omnium.”

“Well, I am pleased to hear that,” Petras sighs tiredly, “Robospierre and O’Deorain, I will admit that I was not fully on-board with this rather fantastical idea of yours, but von Alder should prove to be a great asset against the Omnium alongside Katya’s new mechs.”

Moira does not miss how Vialli rolls his eyes over that statement. He appears to be muted to the main conversation, as his mouth moves silently -

Probably speaking to someone else in a private conversation.

What are you up to, Mister ‘Leader?’ Moira wonders, watching him coolly.

It’s...difficult to map the alliances and factions of the Servatores, even for a mind as critically organized and as focused as hers. It doesn’t help that only a handful of them are direct leaders and influencers within Talon, while many others run their own circles, organizations, or corporations, all with their own unique...objectives for different global sectors or industries. At the moment, only Vialli, Robospierre, Korpal, Guerra, and herself act as the true “directors of Talon,” with the others only chiming in occasionally to get Talon to “assist” or “throw” missions to aid their other vested interests. Seti, for example, frequently works with Guerra and Petras to get Helix contracted out to manage security in old Watchpoints, prisons, bases, mission - even unique complexes like the management of the confinement of the God Program Anubis.

Petras keeps pushing for Volskaya to enter the fold, Moira recalls, tapping a finger on her smartdesk as she thinks, And Guerra and Korpal are eager to bring in Portero, but Vialli keeps stopping both recruitments - argues that it isn’t necessary to “bring more chefs into the kitchen.”

The problem is that Vialli wasn’t exactly wrong about that - both the inner “Talon council” and the other, looser affiliates have rarely gotten anything “major” done in the last six years since they all jointly brought down Overwatch, mainly because they are too many of them and too many competing interests to work together consistently. Too many factions, too many shifting alliances, too many changing ideologies to coalesce together cohesively into one organized unit.

Within the “Talon council,” Vialli and Guerra struggle against each other the most, with Vialli pushing to “maintain Talon’s current status and organizational structure,” and Guerra arguing for greater militancy, deeper power, stronger actions, but neither of them could quite convince any of the other three to join them fully on one side or the other.

Korpal likes Guerra’s influence but Vishkar is hardly set to engage in any large-scale military operations, Moira sighs, glancing at Sanjay’s scrambled, silent image, And truthfully, he likes stability and profit too much to readily jump into a war...although, if I am remembering correctly, his “investments” in Rio are...struggling.

And Maximilien?

Moira shifts her gaze to his scrambled image as well, realizing that she will probably have to speak with him privately after the main council has concluded.

He plays his cards so close to his chest, she thinks, But surely something must get him to pick a side.

Because this house divided will not stand.
Something...or someone will have to make a choice...and soon.

Or else the “great experiment of Talon” will crumble...and fall -

Just as Overwatch had.

Moira rubs at her left temple, thinking wistfully, God, everything was so much easier when Ogundimu was here. She had been free to simply conduct research when he had been around - the man could organize and lead people like no one else she knew.

Well.

Perhaps with the exception of Reyes.

If the rumors were true, Reyes as the Strike-Commander had been a literal force of destruction to be reckoned with. The man had stopped the apocalypse with only four other soldiers and one bureaucrat at his back, after all.

But even more… “synergizing” as a cohesive element than him -

Had been Morrison -

Who had seemingly built the empire of Overwatch from the ruins of the apocalypse with an army of doctors, scientists, adventurers, and “oddities” at his side -

And he had possessed Reyes’ undying support.

...Literally.

“So,” Vialli states, evidently unmuting himself and struggling to regain control of the conversation, “In summary - Soldier: 76 is not worth our time or focus, is that it?”

“For the entire Servatores, no,” Guerra replies coolly, and Moira presses her mic button to agree, “Indeed. No doubt the CIA and Talon will be enough to handle him.”

In their private conversation, they glance at each other, with Moira raising an eyebrow at Marc.

“The difficulty with bringing down one of these rogue supersoldiers,” Guerra says to the main group, “Is that many of them choose to go down in the most destructive ways possible. He likely has rigged the heavy pulse rifle to be completely disarmed upon his death.”

...He’s probably not wrong about that, Moira thinks with a touch of irony.

No one knows the heavy pulse rifle better than Jack Morrison.

“Almost certainly, his death will also trigger either literal or virtual explosives, or both, causing a release of ‘ground-breaking’ information into the world,” Guerra continues, “Most of these ex-SEP soldiers think they’re out doing some sort of… ‘vigilante justice’ when their political ideologies shift. Trust me - it’s an unfortunate side effect of their treatments and life experiences. They get radicalized into thinking the world is somehow unjust and cruel, and it is their ‘duty’ to correct this supposed wrong. I’ve seen it enough over the last two decades with the ones who survived the Crisis.”

There’s a chorus of semi-consenting grumbling among the Servatores, with Korpal finally speaking up quietly:
“He should be the last SEP soldier unaccounted for, right?”

Moira flicks her gaze to Marc’s private conversation, but Marc lies without hesitation, “Yes. Absolutely.”

_To be a visionary among such liars and thieves_, Moira sighs to herself, _If only everyone could see the beauty of science - maybe then, I will not have to work in such darkness._

In fairness, however -

Marc Guerra has been one of the few people to support her research for years.

But still, the echo of his words “We knew shortly after Geneva that Morrison was alive” rings in her ears, alongside a dark, smoky chuckle that mocks her:

_“Why don’t they know about me? About ‘Reaper’?”_

Because Moira knows.

Oh, how Moira knows.

Those who have been blinded by greed...by war...by a sense of _righteousness_ can never see the true potentials, the true values of her work.

They will only ever see the ways they can gain power from it.

As grateful as she is to Marc for working with her, Moira knows that -

If she ever told him the truth about Reaper -

Marc would seize him immediately, and lock him down so fast that he would never see the light of day again.

Moira scowls slightly.

Is it an irony that “Reaper” has survived and outmaneuvered the likes of the CIA and other intelligence agencies by virtue of his flippant, nonchalant persona - that he has put on such a display of playing the part of the calloused yet casual mercenary that no special operations or military group in the world has seen him as a serious threat?

...Or is that deliberate?

_If anyone knew the truth_, Moira thinks solemnly, _They would not hesitate to drop a fusion bomb on Zaragoza right this second._

...But is that exactly the point?

Moira looks back up to the frozen frame of the Deadlock Gorge - with Reaper tumbling away and “Soldier: 76” bolting around the gas station. Her gaze focuses on Reaper’s flopping form, and she cannot help but wonder:

_Reyes was always so...poised, so focused, yet he could be casual and easygoing at the drop of a hat. It came so easily to him - that...nonchalant wit, that sarcasm, that humor. It was so...easy to get caught up in his pace, in his thought process, in his plan._

In that final year of Overwatch, she had not really been...permitted to interact much with people
outside of Blackwatch. Reyes had kept her from the “important” people at arm’s length, but the rumors had known no distances, flittering to her through hearsay.

And from what she had gathered, there had been only one person who could remotely “manage” Reyes’ personality in all its depth and richness, its pettiness and its pains, its humor and its sarcasm.

Moira turns her gaze to the “soldier” sprinting in the video.

Jack Morrison.

She had never met him.

Though it was not for lack of trying.

(“Jack...Jack...” she remembers Gabriel mumbling and muttering to himself in the haze of his pain, dark grey smoke wisping up off of his skin, thick to the point of being almost liquid, but soft that it almost felt like silk, eyes fluttering in some strange feverish nightmare -)

(“...Do you want to talk about him?” she had asked him gently, genuinely curious to know what the Blackwatch commander and fellow SEP supersoldier thought about his comrade -)

(- And his husband.)

(Gabriel’s eyelids had opened wide, and Moira had almost recoiled in fear -)

(At the furious red flames that had glazed over them -)

(“...Are you mad at him?” Moira had asked, leaning in over the table Gabriel had been strapped to, shining a quick light over his left eye. His pupil had NOT contracted in reflex, and she had quickly made a note -)

(“...Not mad,” Gabriel had slurred out, his eyelids drifting half-closed again, “Not...mad...” But before he had started to drift out of consciousness again, Moira had prompted him, “Not mad - but perhaps frustrated? Annoyed? Sad?”)

(“No...” Gabriel had sighed, “Not those...but...maybe...sad.”)

(Moira had seen a chance to finally ask -)

(“Commander, why does your left wrist say, ‘76’ on it if your number was ‘24?’” she had asked calmly, quietly, gently -)

(“Soldier: 76...” Gabriel had murmured almost dreamily, his eyelids shutting, his body relaxing a little against the pain, the smoke lightening and drifting away, “...Jack.”)

Moira stares at the frozen screen and decides, right then, right there:

*These two must not meet again.*

“Reaper” may be mad at “Soldier: 76” - hell, he might truly want to destroy him -

But the more “Reaper” encounters “Soldier: 76” -

The more he will slowly forgive him.

(Gabriel’s rage and heartbreak had always blinded him to reason and rationality -)
“Well then,” Vialli says decisively, pulling her back into the moment. The “leader” of Talon finally gives them all that characteristic smirk they know him for, saying loudly, “Are there any other problems to discuss? Any other issues, hmm?”

Moira glances to her private conversation with Marc, who also gives her A Look. At the same time, a chat message box appears in the corner of her screen:

[Maximilien.Robospierre]: will you speak with me after your discussion with Guerra?

*Damn him for being so perceptive,* Moira snarks internally, typing back:

[Moira.O’Deorain]: grant me patience, and perhaps I will

Silence answers Vialli, until Korpal says calmly, “If you all will excuse me, I have more projects to attend to. Vidkolu.” Korpal’s scrambled image blips out. Once he’s gone, Vialli chuckles, “I suppose he should work on fixing his mess in Rio before he starts something new...but what can you do? Guerra, you will deal with Soldier: 76?”

“When the higher ups give me more of a budget, maybe I can actually put real agents on the job,” Guerra grumbles, but waves his hand, sighing, “But yes. He will be dealt with...somehow.”

*Eccellente!* Vialli states cheerfully, clapping his hands before he adjusts his tie slightly, “Well, miei amici, I must be off - I have a fine bottle of wine calling my name. Ciao!” The Venetian manager also blips off from the conversation. Seti’s scrambled image blinks slightly, and the Helix president sighs loudly, “Allah, give me strength - that man will be the end of me yet.”

“I can understand his beliefs in principle,” Guerra says, as several of the other scrambled Servatores begin to leave the conversation. The CIA agent mutters tiredly, “But Vialli gets too far ahead of himself sometimes. He can be so...short-sighted, for such...smallminded purposes.”

“...You are far politer than I, Guerra,” Seti admits, before he too blips out of the conversation. With no one left in the main conversation, Guerra turns off his main camera. Moira watches the transcription box start to conclude itself as the rest of the holoprojected screens fade out -

And she turns her attention to Marc’s private conversation.

(No one notices a small stream of code insert itself in the final steps of the transcription.)

(And then - as quickly as the shadow came -)

(It disappears.)

“...Well,” Moira states with icy rage, “...Six years.”

“I’m going to be honest with you,” Marc sighs, looking exhausted again, “Every intelligence agency the world over believed he had either started a new life for himself, or that he had...well, died somewhere.”

“...Really,” Moira asks bluntly, “That was your excuse? You thought he just...magicked himself out of the air and therefore he didn’t exist anymore?”

“What trails did you want me to follow, O’Deorain?” Marc snaps at her, “Since you’re perfect at
everything you set out to do, I assume you would have found him so easily.”

_I figured out “Reaper” after only a few years, but the whole world glossed over him, didn’t they?_ Moira thinks furiously to herself, but she mutters hoarsely, “If you think that’s why I’m angry, you have completely misunderstood the point of this partnership.”

Marc grows contemplative at that, as Moira hissing angrily, “You knew there was the chance that Jack Morrison was alive, and you didn’t tell me? Do you have any idea what this could mean?”

“He’s not a Death Agent,” Marc says resolutely, “Otherwise he wouldn’t be stealing weapons and supplies. He wouldn’t need to. And if he had become one, he would’ve used his powers by now. Six years is more than enough time for a Death Agent to sort their shit out.”

_Because you would know, I suppose, Moira thinks bitterly, And yet, you have no idea where your precious agent “Reaver” ran off to, and you still have no idea who “Reaper” is._

“...Mira,” Marc sighs, relenting, “Like I said, we didn’t even have a real reason to think this was him until the Grand Mesa break-in last week. Montreal was…” Marc stops, scowls, thinks over his own words, before he mutters, “The Watchpoint: Montreal break-in was so much more...precise than this. Stealthy. Secretive. He didn’t...he didn’t want to be caught that time, or some of the others. They were...controlled, so controlled that we didn’t even know things had actually been taken until we did inventories.”

Moira’s eyes narrow at that, and she asks slowly, “...What did he take in _those_?”

Marc frowns, turns his attention to another screen on his computer, tapping at things as he mutters, “Odd things - small too, which is why we didn’t notice they were gone right away. Like...armor pieces. Screenglass. Kevlar meshing. Computer pieces. Biotic fields. Money, but not large amounts. Low level security passes.”

“And none of these set off alarms, did they?” Moira asks with irritation. Marc rolls his eyes, turning his attention back to her screen as he says, “Alright, running security operations on old Watchpoints is a massive undertaking, okay? Security guards and janitors and the IT people - they lose their passes all the time. And you saw how Seti’s been behaving lately. He’s uncooperative on this shit recently - claims he’s getting restless without progress.”

Moira snorts in derision at that, muttering, “Perhaps he ought to actually participate in creating progress than just letting others coordinate it for him.”

Marc smirks over her joke, chuckling back, “Well, I don’t disagree, but Seti has always been reluctant to push for more, even though his precious Mark VI’s would handle Bastions no problem if he just increased their ranges. Still, he got his paycheck from taking over the Watchpoints and Overwatch prisons, so that made it easy for him to settle for profit over progress.”

“...Any chance you can persuade him to change his mind?” Moira asks curiously, but Marc shakes his head, sighing, “O’Deorain, I’ve been around these weapon dealers and arms manufacturers my whole life - they speak money and only money. Once, decades ago, before the Crisis, it was profitable for the arms industry to engage in wars and military operations, but these days, the profit lies in controlled arms management and ‘peace proliferation.’”

Marc’s gaze somehow grows _darker_, as he mutters with a deep bitterness, “A lingering effect of Overwatch. But no one is brave enough to push past it.”

“...A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the
dawn before the rest of the world,” Moira quotes dryly, but with a touch of genuine sympathy for him. Marc’s eyes soften at that, and he murmurs quietly, “...Sometimes, your sentimentality surprises me, Moira.”

“...That makes two of us,” Moira says, finally reaching for her glass of whiskey. She drinks a long sip from it, before she exhales slowly, “...So now what? We hunt for Morrison and then end him?”

“...You want him,” Marc finally realizes, saying the words with a bit of frustration to his tone, “For experiments.”

“At least let me check his mutations,” Moira half-asks, half-bargains, “Let me see if he has the right ones, or enough of the right ones to justify enhancing him further.”

“I cannot believe you want to give him immortality,” Marc grumbles, “What - do you think we’re going to be able to brainwash him into helping Talon, like we did with Lacroix? You’re handing him literal immortality just for him to use that against us -”

*It wasn’t Talon he was fighting there,* Moira thinks, remembering how those two figures had been so enraptured by each other that they had dropped *everything* to fight *each other* over the world.

And more importantly…

Moira has no qualms about abandoning an organization that has lost its purpose in relation to *her* objectives.

If Talon cannot see the value of making Jack Morrison undergo the Al Azif transformation -

Then it will be time to part ways with Talon.

But for now…

The organization retains its usefulness.

And besides -

Moira thinks about the *other* one, the *successful* one, the Undying Death who wanders through the Zaragoza Base like a living shadow.

Just like Crete, Talon is the labyrinth necessary for him to be lost in, to enact his anger upon instead of her, to get enmeshed in the sinking, ensnaring web as he struggles to defy the truth he represents.

Moira sighs, drawing up her resolve.

She’s always been *terrible* at business -

But it’s time to make a bargain with War.

“You bring him in alive, and let me do my tests,” Moira says solemnly, “And I will let you replicate my Biotic Grasp.”

Marc stops mid-sentence to blink at her in *utter shock*.

“¿Es en serio?” he whispers, the sheer surprise of it knocking his language into Spanish.

Because Moira knows.
Oh, how Moira knows.

She knows the real reason Talon keeps her around.

She sees only the beauty in science and discovering the true potentials of humanity.

But Talon -

Talon sees only the **usefulness** of her knowledge.

Talon sees only the **weaponization** of her knowledge.

“...Fine,” Marc agrees, “We’ll do our best to catch him, but keep in mind that if we need to put him down, we will. And this doesn’t extend to others, obviously - I can’t control what Seti or Vialli does.”

“Well, they are nuisances, but they’re also several continents away from him,” Moira says contemplatively, before thinking, *But leave it to Morrison to be such a bloody chancer that he pushes his luck.*

“Knowing both of them, they’ll separately try to start shit, only for both plans to be almost identical,” Marc snorts. There’s a pause, and then Marc sighs, “Alright, O’Deorain, I’ve got a literal fucking trainwreck to clean up - message me if you’ve got more stuff to discuss. For now, we’ll keep Soldier: 76 between us.”

“Of course,” Moira states bluntly.

She’s not going to risk exposing him to the wolves.

...Not yet, anyways.

*Hasta luego,*” Marc says, and then his screen blips closed.

Moira sits in silent stillness for a moment, thinking over the long list of things she has to do to make.

Things.

Fit.

Together.

Properly.

…

A nearly impossible task.

But she isn’t the creator of the impossible for nothing.

Moira downs the rest of her whiskey, and then places the glass back down. This time, though, she doesn’t refill it, instead letting her fingers drift to her virtual keyboard. She does three things in rapid-fire order:

The first.

She sends a quick, hasty message to Vialli, writing:
[Moira.O’Deorain]: was THAT your plan?

---

The second.

She writes out a fuller email to the Zaragoza Base:

To: Zaragoza Base
From: -encrypted-
About: Reaper’s schedule

Gerente,

When is Reaper available to begin repeated travels to Oasis? The trips should be routine but also sporadic - there needs to be no identifiable pattern to their movements. Can you accomplish this? How quickly can you start?

---

The third.

Moira sends a private call to Maximilien.

It takes a second of electronic ringing, before the Omnic banker opens up her message, still sitting in the same spot he had been for the council. He says nothing, but Moira states in a dark, clear voice: “We need to discuss how the hands have been changed.”

---------

(5 minutes earlier, at the end of the Sevatores transcription)

[E]: I have looked over the file for Soldier: 76.

[C]: You have?

[E]: Indeed, [Name encrypted] has been consulting with me on the SEP soldiers that are still alive, and assessing their current health conditions. Soldier: 76 is in remarkable shape, but he is nothing noteworthy… Well, until now, I suppose. But that is purely in terms of his political actions and not his biology.
The vast majority of the still-living SEP soldiers are nothing special. Well, compared to other supersoldiers, of course. Reyes was the last one worthy of any significant focus, and we all know what happened to him. So while Soldier: 76’s biology will resist death, he does not have the genetic potentials to become a Death Agent.

I suppose you have spoken to Reaper about documenting his condition then?

Indeed. As I sent in the message to the council members last week, Reaper is cooperating with Talon now. He has finally seen the benefits that Talon provides its contracted mercenaries, and he is willing to work with my laboratory here in [Location encrypted] to help my research on the Death Agents progress.

And how is the new Crusader coming along?

The Crusader Death Agent has proven successful. In fact, we will begin deployment later this week. [Name encrypted] has requested a personal mission, one which should be easy and quite simple to accomplish. After that, he should be ready to face the [Location encrypted].

Well, I am pleased to hear that. [Name encrypted] and [Name encrypted], I will admit that I was not fully on-board with this rather fantastical idea of yours, but [Name encrypted] should prove to be a great asset against the Omnium alongside [Name encrypted]’s new mechs.

So, in summary, Soldier: 76 is not worth our time or focus, is that it?

For the entire [Name encrypted], no.

Indeed. No doubt the CIA and Talon will be enough to handle him.

The difficulty with bringing down one of these rogue supersoldiers is that many of them choose to go down in the most destructive ways possible. He likely has rigged the heavy pulse rifle to be completely disarmed upon his death.

Almost certainly, his death will also trigger either literal or virtual explosives, or both, causing a release of ground-breaking information into the world. Most of these ex-SEP soldiers think they’re out doing some sort of… vigilante justice when their political ideologies shift. Trust me, it’s an unfortunate side effect of their treatments and life experiences. They get radicalized into thinking the world is somehow unjust and cruel, and it is their duty to correct this supposed wrong. I’ve seen it enough over the last two decades with the ones who survived the Crisis.

He should be the last SEP soldier unaccounted for, right?

Yes, absolutely.

Well then, are there any other problems to discuss? Any other issues, hmm?

If you all will excuse me, I have more projects to attend to. Vidkolu.

[G has signed out of the messenger.]

I suppose he should work on fixing his mess in [Location encrypted] before he starts something new…but what can you do? [Name encrypted], you will deal with Soldier: 76?

When the higher ups give me more of a budget, maybe I can actually put real agents on the job, but yes, he will be dealt with. Somehow.
[C]: Excellente! Well, miei amici, I must be off - I have a fine bottle of wine calling my name. Ciao!

[[C] has signed out of the messenger.]

[A]: Allah, give me strength, that man will be the end of me yet.

[B]: I can understand his beliefs in principle, but [Name encrypted] gets too far ahead of himself sometimes. He can be so...short-sighted, for such...smallminded purposes.

[A]: You are far politer than I, [Name encrypted].

[[A] has signed out of the messenger.]

[[B] has signed out of the messenger.]

[Chat disengagement: INITIATED.]

[All members automatically signed out of the messenger.]

[Chat logged and disengaged - ]

[[😍] accessing from computer terminal [Unknown number] in [Location unknown]]

[[😍] is recording the chat log]

[[😍] accessing files attached in the chat log]

[[ERROR]: access to files attached in the chat log denied]

😍: mierda

[[ERROR] Chat logged and attempting to disengage - ]

😍: creo que no (tn: I think not)

[[😍] is overriding chat disengagement - ]

[[ERROR] Chat logged and attempting to disengage - ]

😍: estás persistente, mierda pequeña (tn: you are persistent, little shit)

[[😍] is recording the chat log]

[[😍] accessing files attached in the chat log]

[[ERROR]: access to files attached in the chat log denied]

😍: qué chingados

😍: esta seguridad está dura (tn: this security is tough)

😍: pinche seguidadita (fucking security)

[[ERROR] Chat logged and attempting to disengage - ]

[[😍] is overriding chat disengagement - ]
[ LGBT profile image is overriding name encryption - ]

[ ERROR]: override of name encryption denied

[ ERROR]: Chat logged and attempting to disengage - ]

خوف: joder
خوف: miras qué cabrón (don’t be a smartass)

[ LGBT profile image is overriding chat disengagement - ]

[ LGBT profile image is overriding name encryption - ]

[ ERROR]: override of name encryption denied

[ ERROR]: LGBT is accessing from a nonsecure computer terminal

[ ERROR]: CHAT IS UNDER LOCK

خوف: AY, PINCHE MIERDA
خوف: YA VALIO MADRE (I’m fucked)
خوف: ....eh...
خوف: está suficiente (it’s enough)

[ ERROR]: CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION INITIATED

خوف: NO
خوف: SEGURIDAD ES MALA (the security is bad)

[ LGBT profile image is overriding chat lock and file destruction - ]

[ ERROR]: LGBT is accessing from a nonsecure computer terminal

[ ERROR]: CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION INITIATED

[ LGBT profile image has completed recording of the chat log]

خوف: muchas gracias, seguridadita
خوف: Adios, amiga!

[ LGBT profile image has logged out of the messenger]

[ ERROR]: Chat logged and attempting to disengage

[ ERROR]: CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION INITIATED

[ ERROR]: CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION INITIATED

[ ERROR]: CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION READY

[ CHAT LOCK AND FILE DESTRUCTION COMPLETE]
Semáforo: Muy Interesante

Wednesday, July 1, 2076: 12:16 p.m. - Santa Fe, New Mexico

Sombra flicks through the chat log on her datapad, reviewing the information once again.

It had been surprisingly easy to get to Santa Fe - she’d recovered her pack from where she had stashed it in the corner of the diner (after giving the soldier the run around, pobrecito), filled up some water containers, and hit the road north/northeast out of the gorge. Eventually, the old, largely forgotten two-lane highway had merged with a slightly busier one, and she’d found a bus that ran semi-hourly between Albuquerque and Santa Fe with a few stops along the way. The area out here was semi-arid desert, and she’d been mildly surprised to see a number of deserted, run-down towns dotting the highway - relics of a bygone era when the United States had prospered enough to afford such small places. Wonderfully, the bus had stopped at the Central Station in Santa Fe, and it had been incredibly easy to purchase a ticket back to El Paso, Texas.

She supposes she could’ve just...gotten on with her cloaking on, but why be that rude?

Also her biosystem’s batteries needed some recharging.

That meant a few things: food, electrolytes, sunshine, and sleep.

So here she was, sitting at one of the bright, sunlit cafes in Santa Fe’s Central Station, munching on a (bland) sandwich and drinking a sports drink while waiting for the next train south, when her monitor had alerted her of a new chat from her most favorite group of people in the world.

Servatores Super Omnes.

That was the name the majority of their files were under, although there were… a number of inconsistencies in the where/when/how they filed stuff and Sombra could barely tell if this was a deliberate attempt to throw people like her off their scent, or if they were...well -

If they were simply a group of idiots.

Incredibly lucky, incredibly powerful idiots if they were.

Getting into their systems had been...miserably difficult to do. When they had forced her hand three years ago, they fried her original computer hardware from the inside out. They had forced her to get an entirely new system, and also forced her to finalize the design of her current biosystem, upgrading from the temporary one she’d developed as a child to the current, permanent one she’d had installed on herself.

She had been angry at the time, fueled by power and rage and revolución, and it had been hell to pay for - the brain surgery alone had cost her a fortune, but it had proved to be the best thing she could’ve
ever done.

Her biosystem was her, and she, her biosystem.

They were one and the same.

*Una y las mismas.*

And she would not trade that for the world.

Because her biosystem would be the key to controlling it.

Once she had managed to sneak her way onto their servers, however, getting back in when she needed to was a breeze.

Still, she had to be careful.

Because if she fucked up using her biosystem...well...

Her fried computer is a testament to what could happen.

Sombra sips from her drink, mulling over her options.

She is infinitely frustrated that she hadn’t been able to get past the name encryptions and the file access locks, but just having the chat log was important in and of itself. Not knowing names and locations was rough, but there were enough details in there to piece a few things together.

*Individual [B] being a Spanish-speaking American who was “in charge” of dealing with the remaining SEP supersoldiers is...specific,* she considers. True, there’s definitely a surprisingly large population that probably fits into that category, but there are other things to consider: Individual [C] had said that the supersoldiers were his “experiments,” and he either was still active in the CIA or had enough influence to persuade someone within the CIA to do missions as favors. He also had connections to Portero, something that Sombra had both delighted in and been enraged by.

*I knew that fucking viper was corrupt as sin,* Sombra simmers to herself, taking another bite of her sandwich. She had known about Portero’s ties to the CIA and Helix for awhile, but knowing that he was connected to a “Sevator?”

It made her blood *boil.*

*But...it did not seem like Portero himself was in the group,* Sombra considers slowly, scrolling back through the transcription. There was nothing about how LumériCo’s hard work had been “betrayed” for Deadlock or anything of the sort.

In fact, aside from the three main speakers - [A], who had high-level access within Helix, [B], who was the CIA asshole who had set up the “mission,” and [C], some Italian individual who had been in charge of sending the spider and her retinue - it had been nearly *impossible* to figure out who was who.

*Individual [D],* Sombra thinks slowly, scrolling back to when the “fourth” member had jumped in, had used “monsieur” to address Individual [B] to say that (presumably) Individual [C] had operated without [D]’s input, but otherwise there was little to go off of...

Except for...

Sombra scowls darkly.
Something about the “New Crusader” program, along with...some *bizarre* lines by the fifth individual.

[E].

The one who claimed that “Soldier: 76” was “nothing noteworthy.”

...*The Crusaders were German, not French*, Sombra thinks, still frowning as she reads through that part of the conversation:

[E]: Indeed, [Name encrypted] has been consulting with me on the SEP soldiers that are still alive, and assessing their current health conditions. Soldier: 76 is in remarkable shape, but he is nothing noteworthy… Well, until now, I suppose. But that is purely in terms of his political actions and not his biology.

[E]: The vast majority of the still-living SEP soldiers are nothing special. Well, compared to other supersoldiers, of course. Reyes was the last one worthy of any significant focus, and we all know what happened to him. So while Soldier: 76’s biology will resist death, he does not have the genetic potentials to become a Death Agent.

[A]: I suppose you have spoken to Reaper about documenting his conditions then?

[E]: Indeed. As I sent in the message to the council members last week, Reaper is cooperating with Talon now. He has finally seen the benefits that Talon provides its contracted mercenaries, and he is willing to work with my laboratory here in [Location encrypted] to help my research on the Death Agents progress.

[F]: And how is the new Crusader coming along?

[D]: The Crusader Death Agent has proven successful. In fact, we will begin deployment later this week. [Name encrypted] has requested a personal mission, one which should be easy and quite simple to accomplish. After that, he should be ready to face the [Location encrypted].

[F]: Well, I am pleased to hear that. [Name encrypted] and [Name encrypted], I will admit that I was not fully on-board with this rather fantastical idea of yours, but [Name encrypted] should prove to be a great asset against the Omnium alongside [Name encrypted]’s new mechs.

---

Sombra taps her fingers along the surface of the table, drumming out a faint beat as she breaks this...*weird* section down by topic.

*Okay, so first*, she thinks, *They’ve like...revived the Crusader program? Only someone in it wants a personal mission, which the SSO assholes are letting him do. And then he’s going to face… She scans further, adding carefully, An Omnium. Which, really, the only “active” Omnium these days is Siberia.*

And mechs?

That’s either the new Korean Mobile Exo-force mechs they’re talking about -
Or whatever that bruja Volskaya is cooking up.

Neither group appears to be in here, though, Sombra considers, Or at least, neither group has someone representing their interests “actively” - just that [F] here made a passing remark about them in relation to the Omnium and this...Crusader program.

And now.

The weirdass part.

¿Qué chingados es un ‘Death Agent??’ Sombra stammers in her own head, rereading the conversation like...six times just to make sure she read it right. “Reaper” is one...or at least, they think he is, but they sound like something straight out of a comic book...or a movie. She massages her forehead with two fingers, exhaling slowly, still feeling like her thoughts are sluggish as her biosystems pull all her energy, And this new Crusader guy is one too? But they said that the soldado couldn’t “become” one?? That he doesn’t have the... “genetic potentials” for it?

And [E]...

[E] said that “Reyes” was the last supersoldier “worthy of any significant focus,” Sombra assesses closely, But that they “all know what happened to him” but then later [E] also says that “Reaper” is working with their lab...somewhere, to provide information on the so-called “Death Agents?”

...So [E] doesn’t know Reaper’s actual identity?

Sombra’s eyes narrow, glancing back to the part where [E] talks about “Soldier: 76,” determining carefully:

So...either [B] has lied to [E] about Soldier: 76...and given [E] a fake file -

Or [E] knows something...and is covering for [B]?

But this is the part that Sombra can’t quite figure out:

Why?

For either of those?

And what the actual fuck is a “Death Agent?”

...Are they trying to make more people like “Reaper?” Sombra thinks, recalling how the mercenary - dressed in thick, oily black smoke - had descended upon the hover carrier holding the bomb -

And unleashed literal hellfire upon those American soldiers.

The thought of more...people being like that sends a cold chill up her partially synthetic spine and a shiver across her scalp. Sombra refocuses on the chat log, thinking icily:

They must be stopped.

But suddenly, another thought occurs to her:

If they didn’t make Gabriel into “Reaper,” Sombra wonders, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion, Then who or what did? And when?

All she’s been able to find on the elusive “mercenary” were a few thin, threadbare contracts from
different groups with his call sign on them, but nothing else existed to identify him. She had put the pieces of “Reyes” and “Reaper” together when she had found a single, isolated piece of audio from the wreckage of a small stealth ship in the Pacific - a bizarre and incredibly odd find that she’d discovered when searching for access to the lost Ecopoint: Hawai’i.

With the audio dated [12.07.2069], the short, barely registered audio contained only two speakers -

The first with a deep, whiskey-and-seastorm rasp that would’ve been recognized the world over only a few years ago:

“Reaper -”

“Protocols, pilot!” the other voice - raw sunshine spun into molten gold, low and quiet but fierce in its focus -

“Fuck - Commander Reyes, we’re being targeted -”

And then silence.

Sombra shuts her eyes, thinking back on how she had spent days without sleep, combing over flight records and ship lists, searching for the “name” she had pulled from its only partially in-tact computer systems: BW-00. But she had found nothing - as far as digital records, BW-00 had never existed. Hell, in theory, it couldn’t even be registered, as the internal ship records at Overwatch and Blackwatch forced at least one of the two digits to be “non-zero.” Likewise, an OW-00 ship also could not exist, with OW-01 being the “Strike-Commander’s ship.”

And no trace of...whatever had brought the ship down, either. No messages within the SSO files she could sneak herself access to, nor anything from any nation with a Pacific Coast, and Ecopoint: Hawai’i…

Another chill crawls up her spine despite the heat of the Santa Fe sun.

The disaster of Ecopoint: Antarctica was reasonably well-known to the public, even if no one (not even Overwatch) had details. But the existence and subsequent failure of the frozen Ecopoint was public at least.

But Ecopoint: Hawai’i.

As far as Sombra could find, that was something straight out of a horror film.

She had no idea if the events of the crash of BW-00 and the...thing that had happened to Ecopoint: Hawai’i were related

But at the very least, “Reaper” as an “individual,” a “persona,” and a “mercenary” had existed before both.

Sombra stares at the words “Soldier: 76” again, thinking quietly:

And of course, he wasn’t surprised by “Reaper’s” existence or appearance at all.

She had possessed zero qualms about letting the two men duke it out while she EMP’ed the bomb, but that also hadn’t answered any questions she still had about them. And this SSO conversation had only made things worse.

As she reaches for her drink, Sombra sighs internally, This is what I get for following the Viper King
into his lair, I suppose.

She had thought forcing a conflict over this bomb and inserting the soldier into the mix would cause more cracks in SSO and the Talon council, and while it had, none of those cracks seemed to lead into the center of the maze, just that they revealed more twists and turns.

Sombra takes a swig of the fruity sports drink, savoring the surprisingly mellow flavor as she taps the edge of her datapad again, contemplating her choices.

...Is [B] lying to [E]? Why won’t they just...reveal that Jack Morrison is alive?

Sombra takes a bite of her sandwich, sighing to herself.

And now comes the truly difficult part.

How to play the game.

She drums her fingers on the table, glancing out the window to the busy street outside, people bustling around in the hot Santa Fe summer sunlight.

SSO had seemingly reached the conclusion to let the CIA handle the soldier, and since none of them apparently (?!) knew who Reaper was (although perhaps they knew why he was like that???), Individual [B] was still willing to let Talon “help” drive Soldier: 76 out from the shadows into some trap.

 Probably.

That’s how she would do it anyways.

...But does she want the soldier to get caught?

...It’s always better to have more “friends” to work with, Sombra considers, knowing it’s incredibly likely that Morrison will take her bait and start a personal mission against LumériCo. And him stealing the attention off of her from not just LumériCo, but the CIA and Talon as well is beyond enticing.

But if they actually catch him?

Could Sombra take that risk?

It would be a struggle to out maneuver them on this issue - they could decide to set a hit on Jack Morrison, which would probably be difficult for them, as the soldado was a sly bastard who generally knew how to outsmart others, but the man had been reckless recently, being careless about where he was caught on camera, stealing major weapons and equipment, breaking into multiple Watchpoints in the span of a month or two.

If he kept up the self-destructive behavior, a well-trained assassin could locate him quickly.

And Sombra is not through with him yet.

The real issue that she can’t quite figure out, however, is why [B] won’t tell anyone.

The more “friends” who know, the more they can help him catch Morrison, Sombra thinks, reaching for her drink again. The Helix individual had offered to “help,” but [B] and [E] (wittingly or unwittingly) had put a stop to that, claiming that there was no need.
But if they revealed Morrison to SSO and Talon, and possibly the black market…

_Mierda._

There would be a _feeding frenzy_ among the world’s hitmen, mercenaries, assassins, and bounty hunters to find him -

And tear him _apart._

Morrison is a clever, cocksure bastard, but he is not self-aware enough to outrun the entirety of the world’s hitmen.

And the mere thought of it would sic “Reaper” on him like a hellhound -

_Wait._

Sombra nearly drops her drink as the realization hits her.

_How did Reaper_ recognize Soldier: 76 if the world’s richest and most prominent League of Evil AF Businessmen didn’t know?

In her head, Sombra pulls up a small snippet of the fight, when Reaper had _hurled_ himself at Soldier: 76, how the entire world had seemed to disappear for them, allowing her to reach the payload entirely unnoticed.

_He knew_, Sombra thinks, her eyes glazed over as her mind reviews the clip, _Almost without hesitation. He knew that Jack Morrison was alive and that he was Soldier: 76 -_

The clip stops -

As Sombra’s eyes refocus in the physical world, staring up at the ceiling of the train station as she finally -

_Finaly -_

Understands:

**SSO DOESN’T KNOW JACK MORRISON IS STILL ALIVE.**

It wasn’t that SSO didn’t know Morrison _is_ Soldier: 76 -

It’s that they had no reason to believe Morrison was even _alive._

Sombra nearly cracks the screen of her datapad as she whips forward, scrolling through the conversation furiously, re-reading everything for what feels like the twentieth time to confirm that his name was _never_ mentioned.

_Imposible._

She doesn’t have _nearby_ all of her information here - the vast majority of it is saved in secure hard drives and servers hidden throughout Dorado and Veracruz, but she does her best to keep both her biosystem synthetic drives and her portables up-to-date on what she needs, so she taps open the shit she has on Jack Morrison and Soldier: 76. It’s almost as bare as “Reaper’s” information, but she has a few extra things: an unsigned, undated, undisclosed note from _someone_ within the United Nations and Overwatch (prior to the Petras Act) stating that “Morrison’s remains had never been located” in the ruins of Geneva; a few of her own notes, linking to video files of her watching “Soldier: 76”
stealth his way through Watchpoint: Montreal, sneaking small items, his face bisected by two “new” snarled scars; a single sheet of information on the SEP soldiers she had barely managed to tear out of an old US military server before alarms had kicked off; the files of him rummaging through Watchpoint: Grand Mesa last week.

Sombra watches another clip of him finding the heavy pulse rifle, her thoughts racing as they blur through her head:

Nobody knows, nobody knows - there might be only three or four people in the whole world who know Jack Morrison is alive, maybe one more if someone in the United Nations really wrote that note - maybe they sent it to Individual [B], but that means there’s Jack himself, then [B], someone in the United Nations, me, and -

Sombra opens the tab with the SEP list, her eyes dropping automatically to “Soldier ID: 24” and then “Soldier ID: 76.”

Is that how Gabriel knew?

Sombra outright glares.

Why is Morrison using a nickname that people within the U.S. military and CIA will recognize?

Sombra scrolls through the list again, before thinking cautiously to herself, Or...most of these soldiers are dead.

[G]: He should be the last SEP soldier unaccounted for, right?

[B]: Yes, absolutely.

Flickers through her mind, and Sombra pauses, reminding herself, [B] doesn’t know about Reaper, but [B] might also be lying about two things: knowing that Jack Morrison is alive, and knowing that Jack Morrison is Soldier: 76.

But Morrison still decided to wear a jacket with the number 76 in big, bold, ugly colors, Sombra continues, making a small face over the jacket, Is he trying to play games with [B]? Or other people who have connections to SEP?

But Sombra’s eyes drift up to “Soldier ID: 24,” and she reconsiders:

...Or is he sending a message to someone else?

She massages her fingers into her forehead, feeling her renewed energy from the food begin to fade as her biosystem drains it into its synthetic batteries.

She had tried to bust open fractures within SSO with this bomb -

But all she had done was give herself a bigger headache.

There are still too many things I don’t know, Sombra sighs, starting to close her tabs as she gets ready to find her train, And now I have even more questions.

But she knows something for certain now -
If no one knows that Jack Morrison is alive -

Then this could be a powerful hand to play.

For now, she needs to sit back and see if anything happens with the soldier and vaquero reacting to LumériCo, see if any other information leaks begin to trickle out of the cracks. And she has to monitor the ghost mercenary’s movements, see if she can figure out where this “laboratory” is and what its purpose is. And she has to try and look for more intel on some “New Crusader” program.

And then...whatever the hell the “Death Agents” are.

There are almost too many things to keep track of. I wonder if I’ll need to play a card soon, Sombra thinks as she taps at the table, before standing and stretching. Her train is almost here. She goes to shove her datapad into her pack when a thought occurs to her:

What if she exposed Jack?

It is a terrifying, risky, and powerful idea - bold, incredibly bold - and could potentially put her and the soldier in massive danger, but if she plays it right, she could expose Individual [B], jeopardize their relationships within SSO, cause further cracks to appear, throw the black market into chaos, give Jack a warning, put him on the alert...if she leaves wiggle room for skepticism and doubt, the public would have no idea what to make of the situation, and it would be beyond the control of the group - their ability to wrangle in a mixed and complicated perception would be beyond their grasp.

It would put the other Overwatch members on the alert, shake them up...get them moving...

Gabriel already knew, so there’s no risk of tilting his situation.

But does Widowmaker know?

The risk of this affecting her is...incredibly slim with how insulated Talon keeps her, but then, hypothetically, the knowledge could only have a positive effect. Potentially, she could blame Jack for the lack of action surrounding her...situation, but she is a good little soldier, she would not go off on her own without orders.

Sombra slings her pack over her shoulder, but keeps her datapad out, tapping furiously through the files connected to her main computer.

It looks like -

It looks like it’s time for all that hard work to start paying off.

She grins to herself as she heads to her platform, tapping away, pulling up the classified Geneva files she had been able to access and copy - reports on Morrison’s body never being found, investigations into accusations of corruption, the skepticism on the accusations themselves, a number of formal petitions filed by Gabriel, several reports and petitions filed by Jack, internal memos sent by Gerárd Lacroix and Jesse McCree, Gabriel’s notes back -

Dios, there was so much she had to do to organize this properly.

As Sombra boards the southbound train, she opens the tab for Atlas News correspondents.

What a difficult game to play.

What a fun game to play.
"I'll find out who really runs the world...I'll find their weaknesses, and how to exploit them.

"...And when I do - I'LL be the one pulling the strings."

---

Who watches the (Over)Watchmen?

Why -

The eye in the sky, of course.

--------

A lot of people believe The Eye organization is either 1) The Iris worshipped by the Shambali or 2) some sort of Omnic God Program but in my opinion

It's way more interesting

If the conspiracy is actually just a group of people

Trying to do what they think is right

...Even if they are also a bunch of idiots.
It's 6:45 a.m. on January 1st and Jack is:

1. Awake way too goddamn early
2. Not really sure what kind of weird military experiment he's put himself in
3. Now aware of how much he's missed snow
4. Hungry
5. Not sure where he's supposed to sit in the SEP mess hall

when his clumsiness fumbles him into a chance encounter with someone else who is awake way too goddamn early.

And by some sort of small miracle

Jack actually manages to save the moment from being a complete disaster.

...

Kinda.

(At least he's a hilarious and attractive disaster, in Gabriel's opinion.)

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Nearly thirty years later, a reaper struggles to sleep

Chapter Notes

15 Jan 2018 update:

HEYO, it's that chapter from that fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Supersoldier” redirects here. For other uses, see [Supersoldier (disambiguation)].

“Enhancement program” redirects here. For general human augmentation, see [Human enhancement].

The Soldier Enhancement Program, also known as the initials SEP, was an advanced medical and military training program conducted by the United States Army Special Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency from January 2047 to July 2047. The exact details of the program are still heavily classified, but the original purpose was to “genetically and phenotypically enhance selected
recruits and soldiers of the Special Forces and develop a new programmatic military and tactical training to resist and counter Omnic forces and Omniums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.”

Selected Special Forces candidates, officially called “candidates” or “soldiers” within the program, or colloquially called “supersoldiers” by the general public, developed increased physical and mechanical strength, faster and more flexible agility, longer periods of sustained endurance, rapid innate biological healing processes, and higher stores of biochemical energy levels.

The program was developed jointly by the United States Special Operations Command, the United States Army Special Forces, and the Special Activities Division of the Central Intelligence Agency. The goal was to develop two Special Forces companies (composed of six Operational Detachment Alpha teams and one Operational Detachment Bravo team each) of predominantly “enhanced” soldiers to engage in unconventional warfare tactics, special reconnaissance missions, and intelligence-gathering during the second and third years of the Omnic Crisis. However, shortly after the Battle of Detroit and the Battle of Bakersfield were concluded, both companies were disbanded, and the SEP soldiers were integrated into other Special Forces groups. The exact size, extent, location, and nature of the program remains classified. It is not known if the program was repeated after the Crisis, or if variants of it existed before compared to other national “enhancement programs” (see: [The Russian Advanced Soldier Program] and [Enhanced Soldier Development of PRC]).

Only a few individuals have claimed or acknowledged their parts in the program publically, including: [Jack Morrison], the Strike-Commander of Overwatch; [Gabriel Reyes], the Crisis-era Strike-Commander of Overwatch and the eventual commander of Overwatch’s “Special Operations Division”; [Monique Carter-Tsang], former Secretary of Defense; [Riya Naidu], former director of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention; and [Felix Ochoa-Morris], former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The commander of the USSOCOM when the program was active was General [Sofía Flores]. A number of individuals have denied being part of the program, despite claims from known and other likely members listing them as being present when the program was active.

The program is widely considered one of the most controversial projects undertaken by the United States military and CIA, but even in 2076, 72% of American citizens polled still regarded the program as “crucially necessary” to America surviving the Crisis, with 61% of all individuals polled calling the candidates “heroes during the Crisis.”

1. Background
   1. The Omnic Crisis in the United States
   2. Creation of the Soldier Enhancement Program
   3. Selection of the candidates

2. Medical Component of the Program
   1. Genetic modifications and theorized phenotypic changes

[1.3 Selection of the candidates]

The full list of SEP candidates remains classified. However, remarks by known individuals in interviews and during the investigations of the program by the United States Army have set a few known “parameters” set by the coordinators of the program:

1. Candidates were between the ages of 20-25 at the start of January 1st, 2047
2. Candidates must have been Special Forces soldiers or have passed the Special Forces Assessment and Selection.
3. Candidates who had only recently passed SFAS were required to have completed the first half of their Qualifications Course before being recruited to SEP.
4. Most of the “Qualifications Course only” candidates were required to know a second language at conversational fluency prior to recruitment.

Candidates who were already active Special Forces operators were removed from their ODA teams and received a promotion in rank or advancement in position, or were given the opportunity to receive advanced cross-training into a secondary MOS.

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An Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) group is the smallest core squad of twelve to thirteen “operators” or “commandos” of the United States Army Special Forces. All individual ODA members and the ODA as a whole group are trained in five primary tactical operation types: unconventional warfare (the original and most important mission of Special Forces), foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action, and counter-terrorism. Other, secondary operation types include: combat search and rescue (CSAR), counter-narcotics, counter-proliferation, hostage rescue, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian demining, information operations, peacekeeping, psychological operations, security assistance, and manhunts.

An ODA consists of 12 individuals, each of whom has a specific function (MOS or Military Occupational Specialty) on the team - however all members of an ODA conduct cross-training. The ODA is led by an 18A (Detachment Commander), a Captain, and a 180A (Assistant Detachment Commander) who is their second in command, usually a Warrant Officer One or Chief Warrant Officer Two.

The team also includes the following enlisted operators:

- **Operations Sergeant (18Z) - (Master Sergeant):** The Operations Sergeant is responsible for the overall organization, functionality and training of an SF team. They make sure the team is outfitted correctly and supports the ODA commander (18A).
- **Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant (18F) - (Sergeant First Class):** This team member ensures that the team has all the equipment and supplies needed for the mission. They also gather and analyze mission-critical intelligence.
- **TWO (2) Weapons Sergeants (18B) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Weapons Sergeants are experts in a wide range of U.S. and foreign weapons systems, from pistols and to light artillery and anti-aircraft missiles.
- **TWO (2) Communications Sergeants (18E) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** SF Communications Sergeants are proficient in the gamut of radio communications equipment and techniques used in the field, everything from morse code to encrypted satellite transmissions and IT technology.
- **TWO (2) Medical Sergeants (18D) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Special Forces Medics are first-class battlefield trauma medical technicians as well as being proficient in more general medical care.
- **TWO (2) Engineering Sergeants (18C) - (Sergeant First Class / Sergeant):** Engineering Sergeants are experts in constructing defensive measures and developing “passive” offensive measures. They are experts in explosive demolitions and can destroy buildings, bridges, and other structures to better suit the needs of the team when infiltrating. SF Engineers are also proficient in military and civil construction and can carry out a range of projects from...
fortifications to civil engineering tasks such as digging wells or building a schoolhouse.

A Special Forces company normally consists of six ODAs (Operational Detachments-A) or “A-Teams.” An ODA is identified by its group, battalion, company, and the team itself. For example, ODA 1234 would be the fourth team in the third company of the second battalion of 1st Special Forces Group.

Let me introduce myself:

My name's whatever you want it to be

My hands are tied by a rope of your design
I'm so tired of guessing all the time
What's the key - what kind of man do you desire?
You know I could be
A good soldier if that's required

If you think my clothes don't work
And my face don't fit

Let me introduce myself:
My name's whatever you want it to be
I like the way you hold yourself
And I'd like you to be holding me
I could be the man who chases you hard
Or I could be the one who's got the head start
Let me introduce myself
I'll be whatever you want to see
What will it be?
Jack’s been in North Carolina for so long that he’s forgotten what a “real” winter looks and feels like.

But now that he’s seen it again -

He won’t forget this.

He stands at the edge of the main entrance to the mess hall of the partially underground “Soldier Enhancement Program” facility, where the large northeast-facing windows jut out from the side of the mountain range they’re nestled in. The glass opens to the vast scenery of the mountains, jagged and hard-cut against the dim sky, coated in a pale snow that glints and glitters just faintly beneath the still-twilight atmosphere. The world is cast in the soft haze of a distant, chilled sunrise: a deep, velvety blue, still steeped with diamond stars, that ebbs and flows like a relaxed tide into a wave of quiet, silken purple, like a frost-crystallized lilac with petals frozen unfurled, that dips into a sweetened, lacy pink, perfect as an heirloom rose, tinted with a honeyed gold at the far eastern end. The sun won’t fully rise for another hour or two, but this moment -

Still
And snowy
And stardusted
In the astronomical twilight
Is the sweetest sigh of relief he’s felt in a long time.

Jack inhales deeply, his eyelids fluttering shut -

Letting the moment fall through his lungs and beat into his heart and pump out into his veins -

Before he exhales slowly, letting it go.

It feels like he’s been running - running, sprinting, going for years. His jagged, hard-edged determination and fierce sprinter’s agility had carried him forward forward forward - pushing him through four years of learning and training and work at IUB’s school of nursing, carrying him through biology and chemistry classes, sociology and public health seminars, clinics and practical labs. His friends had thought he was crazy to commit to a minor in Spanish - they’d been 100% correct, of course, when he’d doubled-down on taking extra classes for it, but Jack isn’t just a 100% kind of guy.

He does 110% of anything.

And everything.

Nursing in Bloomington, in Indiana, in...anywhere in the Midwest is a...safe choice. A stable choice. A steady choice. It was already two, three steps out of the farm, an easy, quick, reliable escape from the mundane existence of being a Morrison.
But yeah, no -

Jack hadn’t spent eight years of running goddamn track and field to be content with “running” to the other side of the city and manning a family practice clinic in suburbia for the rest of his life.

He had been vocal about his goals - with his academic fluency in Spanish and a number of public and international health classes in his pocket, his plan had been to join the World Health Organization and work abroad in Central and South America.

Jack was never destined to live out his days in Indiana, the land of rolling plains and deep blue skies.

But in early 2046 -

The world had other plans.

...Or rather -

A massive wave of killer robots had other plans

As they had left their factories

And thrown the trajectory of the world - and Jack’s life - severely off-course.

Jack opens his eyes.

The thin, winter-crisp light drifting in like lazy snowflakes made from photons has hardly shifted, even as the moment of reprieve slips from him.

Jack sighs heavily again, his chest constricted with a mixture of nervousness, melancholy, and perhaps -

Perhaps -

Just a slightly quickened pace, pulse thudding with excitement in his rough, calloused palms.

The mess hall is pretty standard, he guesses - four long, cafeteria-style tables that run the length of the mostly-concrete room, parallel to the windows. There are only a few other “supersoldier candidates” awake at this time, and the rest are probably taking advantage of their “relaxed first week” to sleep in and catch up on much-needed rest.

...It was real dumb of me to get up at five, Jack thinks to himself dryly, but years of running track and overworking himself and - more recently - six months of SFAS and Q-Course had basically pounded “early birdness” into the waking end of his sleep pattern. So really, he’d basically been up by like...4:30 or 5, tossing and turning and growing more and more anxious by the passing minute. Finally he’d forced himself to pace the facility halls, find the gym, and run his legs and lungs out until 6-6:15 am. The activity had soothed him, forced him into a state of “mind-over-matter” serenity, the runner’s high numbing his fears and worries. After that, it had been a nice, surprisingly hot shower (Wonder how long this will last, Jack had joked to himself in his head, water running soothingly down his scalp and over his shoulders, knowing full well that the rest of the “Small Unit Tactics and SERE” portion of the Q-Course would continue here in SEP), a quick return to his barrack room (where his roommate, Adrien Morris, a fellow Q-Course 18Xer, was still soundly and
smartly asleep), and then here.

The mess hall.

...The mostly empty mess hall.

...*Is there a seating arrangement?* Jack wonders to himself - the other candidates’ positions across the tables seem randomly and oddly dispersed, but Jack does note that the majority of the maybe...twenty-ish of the other “early” risers are congregated to the farthest table, the one closest to the windows. The thirteen of them are also the most “awake” it seems, as many of them talk in easy, openly conversational tones with each other in between bites of their breakfast.

A subset of them laugh brightly and cheerfully over some low-volume joke, and Jack’s stomach twists slightly at the sound.

He’s not sure if it’s in anxiety, envy, or wistfulness.

His eyes drift to his right wrist, where the small, thin, waterproof bandage is barely visible between the chilled metallic lunch tray he’s carrying and the hem of his long sweatshirt sleeve.

[Soldier: 76 - John Morrison]

His new tattoo.

His new number.

His new identity.

...

When the ship that had carried most of the Q-Course 18Xers had forced them to parachute down to the Sawtooths at several thousand feet in the bitingly cold air yesterday, Jack - along with Adrien, Wes, and Sarah - had managed to group up the lot of them (54 total) again. Using the survival skills they had just *barely* been taught only a few weeks ago, they had rounded up everyone and started the long trudge up across the ranges before they located the light signal pinpointing the mostly-snow-covered facility. As the 18Xers had grown closer, they had been surprised to come across a few other groups - small clusters of other young Special Forces soldiers. When Jack had asked one of them how long they’d been serving with their ODAs, one of them - a tall, surprisingly cheerful guy by the name of Jamie - had laughed, “Oh, man, none of us have been serving long. If you’re the new bloods, we’re just the juniors.”

“Does that mean there are senior members joining us?” Adrien had asked, each word causing a puff of fogged breath in front of his lips, his deep, earth-toned skin flushed with the exertion of the snowy hike. Sarah, however, had scowled, saying with confusion, “...I thought the age cut-off was 25? Something about how they want the injections to affect our growth plates and brain maturation?”

*Most of our epiphyses are fused*, Jack had thought, *The injections won’t really do much there - maybe one or two slight growth spurts.*

But muscle mass? Glial cell improvements? Increased cerebral synapses and denser grey matter?

Those were *incredibly* likely.

If not a given.
Even then, perched on the side of a snow-covered mountain, breathing hard in the thin air and the high altitude, hauling a repacked parachute and a duffel bag of gear, Jack had paused, had felt his stomach and thoughts twist at his decision.

Genetic mutations, preventing the breakdown of DNA and RNA strands, and “rapidly repairing them” when (not “if”) they do break. The insertion of “improved” genes to lead to the creation and production of “enhanced” proteins and trehalose sugars. Artificial, “sustained” ATP reserves and synthetic, long-lasting enzymes to help the process maintain itself for years.

Possibly decades.

Possibly lifetimes.

All of this resulting in better, more efficient metabolisms, improved structures to bone and muscle tissue, slicker, faster neural relays and slicker, faster responses, accelerated healing and damage repair on every level - cellular, tissue, macroscopic organs, whole body parts.

“Enhancements” to last for decades…

Or possibly lifetimes.

And as a permanent reminder of that commitment -

The first thing the directors had done upon their arrival was not orient them on the program and each other -

But was instead to put them in lines, “check them in,” and then tattoo a “Soldier ID Number,” a scannable code, and then a serial string onto their right wrists.

…

Jack had never had any particular thoughts or feelings about the number “76” before.

And...admittedly

He still doesn’t.

Growing up, he’d always been, like, number 13-17 in 30-person classes, depending on whichever half of the class roster “Morrison” fell in that year, and after high school, he hadn’t bothered to care. He had never rooted for the 76ers (why would he when most of Indiana was either for the Pacers or the Bulls?), and he’s pretty certain his great grandparents had bought the farm in like...1971.

Not that Jack needed his “Soldier ID number” to signify something special, but some attachment - any attachment - would help calm the unnerving, uncanny pulse rushes of “fight or flight” in his veins.

…

Jack scowls distantly.

He will not regret this decision.

He will not let himself.

(“The only way to fight new machines,” he can hear the CIA agent who recruited him - one of the SEP directors, Marc Guerra - say in his astronomical twilight memories from a week ago, “In a new
war...is to become a new type of soldier.”

Jack glances back over the four tables, and resolves himself.

Special Forces soldiers and other special operation agents were notoriously close-knit and wound together - proof that blood of the covenant shed through bullets and wars is thicker than the water of the womb - to the point where even instructors at the Q-Course (older Special Forces members themselves) cautioned the “new blood” on being “overly familiar.”

“You gotta cut your teeth a few times before an older soldier will accept you,” one of the accelerated language instructors had told Jack’s class, “Every ODA has its own style, its own culture. Your first deployment won’t just be inserting you in a different country - you’ll be hard dropped into a squad that runs its own miniature universe -

“And you’ll be expected to haul the weight of galaxies to be accepted.”

…

Jack had done the math.

One-hundred and eight.

One-hundred and eight 18Xer’s and “junior” Special Forces had arrived at the facility yesterday afternoon -

But there had already been other “supersoldier candidates” in one of the dorm/barracks halls -

And the first “junior” Special Forces soldier had been tattooed with the number “25.”

I guess Soldiers 1 through 24 are somewhere around here, Jack thinks, turning a little to descend the short entrance stairs into the mess hall proper when he -

WHAPS

Straight into a solid form, covered in a thick padding of dark grey, woven cotton and -

Suddenly his world is sliding sideways as he feels one of his feet slip off the edge of a stair and -

His mind is struggling to get his limbs to react but -

“Oh shit -” a low voice half-mutters, half-stammers and then -

Jack feels himself stop

As a left hand - steady, stable, reliable, strong - stops him from falling, gently yet firmly supporting him as it grasps his right elbow and arm -

“Dude, shit - you okay??”

Jack blinks once, realizes his world isn’t shifting, and tilts his gaze towards the other guy and -

Oh. God. Damn.

He might be the most attractive person Jack has ever seen.

It’s almost impossible to say which of his features hits the processing part of Jack’s semi-melted brain
first, but perhaps the one that struck him the hardest was the almost astronomical, twilight-lit sense of regality.

Despite the snowcovered, stardusted light of the not-quite-dawn, there is something radiant about him: his skin - deep and rich, a husky hue flaked with gold and copper, like gilded and bronzed lacquer flows just beneath his surface - is tinted faintly peach on his cheeks, and Jack’s crumbling mind isn’t sure if it’s from the chill of being in a concrete building in the dead of winter, or if the other candidate is embarrassed by their awkward flailing. The structure of his face is somehow jagged and hard-edge, yet sweeping and graceful, all high, curving cheekbones and deep angles, perfected with a short, trimmed beard, hair a dusky, dark brown that fluffs just enough to somehow give Jack the urge to run his fingers through it. On another strange, oddly-compelling feeling, Jack spots two long, thin scars running parallel on his right cheek, at least one above his right eyebrow, and one on the side of his lower lip, and Jack fights the need to press his thumb along them, as if to soothe them.

But when Jack’s gaze makes contact with the concerned, confused look the man is giving him -

*Oh, god, I’m beyond fucked -*

His eyes are somehow dark and yet brightly lit, as if alight with a gilded fire behind shadowy smoke, obsidian that is both glass and veil, razor-sharp and sweetly soft -

Like the thinnest rays of the astronomical twilight over mountains, night and day in one, light and dark transcendental, the dawn and the dusk, the sunrise and the sunset timeless.

A moment that shifts and fades away, only made real, physical, embodied -

Made human.

The other candidate gives Jack a genuinely nervous look, asking in that low, easy dry hymn and hum of a voice:

“You okay there, new kid? Are you actually awake?”

*If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up,* the mostly-awake part of Jack’s mind snarks, and his stomach-twisting common sense hastily shouts over it, *DON’T SAY SOMETHING DUMB, DON’T YOU FUCKING DO IT* -

“That beard is non-regulation,” Jack says dumbly, immediately ignoring his brain’s only good advice.

Everything inside of Jack collapses to the floor

Shrivels up into the fetal position

And starts sobbing something utterly incoherent.

The Most Attractive Human Being Jack Has Ever Seen gawks at him, his concern shifting to bewildered shock -

And Jack’s tongue trips over itself to his mistake.

“Oh god -” Jack stammers hastily, feeling the blood pulse and pound in his veins, and he just knows he’s beet red right now - he tenses up, but somehow the words fall out of him like oil. “~ I mean, it’s not a bad thing, oh my god - it looks good, it looks really good - I’m just not used to -”
And then

The unexpected occurs:

A miracle happens.

The other candidate blinks once over Jack’s twisted excuses, before he gives Jack the widest, snuggest, happiest smirk Jack has ever seen and somehow -

It makes him unendingly more attractive.

NO ONE MAN SHOULD LOOK THAT GOOD, the self-depreciating part of Jack’s brain screams, still sobbing on the floor.

And with a smoky, wry laugh lilting his words, the candidate teases him quietly, still carrying that knowing grin:

“In case you hadn’t noticed, lots of things are non-regulation around here, newbie.”

And then -

As if this New Year’s Day couldn’t get any more incredible -

A second miracle occurs.

Jack collects enough pieces of his shattered sense of humor to joke back with an easy sarcastic tone, “Wait - you mean a secret base deep in the mountains where they inject special ops with chemicals and synthetic hormones is not regulation?”

The candidate laughs openly, a dusk-lit sunrise sound that fills the air around them with a faint warmth. He grins at Jack, snarking right back, “Well, you’re a fast one, huh?”

Jack somehow finds the gall and bravery to smirk back, saying teasingly, “Well, I was the fastest member on my college track team.”

“Cute,” the candidate half-laughs, half-snorts with sardonic humor, and somehow -

Miraculously -

Jack finds it easy to banter back, “Funny enough, I was also the cutest on my track team as well.”

“Boy, ya’ll set some low bars on that high jump, huh?” the other candidate taunts back, but that gorgeous smirk is still on his face and that deep yet light glimmer of humor still glitters across his gaze. Jack rolls his shoulders casually, but with his own sly smile, he chuckles, “Well, it was track, not a beauty pageant.”

“Glad to hear it wasn’t the standard for the whole school,” the candidate laughs, and he releases Jack’s arm, and Jack finds that the lack of his touch is somehow less comfortable and less welcome than his fingers wrapped around Jack’s bicep -

The Most Attractive Human Being Ever gives Jack one last smirk, and then turns slightly and continues down the entrance stairs.

It’s only now that Jack realizes the other guy was carrying his own breakfast tray in his right hand, with everything - including a tall cup of creamy coffee - perfectly placed still and not a single drop spilled. Jack watches him go a few steps, his gaze finally processing the like, double sweatpants and
two sweatshirts he’s wearing - all dark grey and black - before Jack just…

Follows him.

(Years later, he still won’t be able to explain why he did it. Just that he did.)

The other candidate skips past the first three tables, before he seats himself at the end of the fourth table - not quite with the other thirteen candidates there, but clearly comfortable enough to sit wherever he wants. He rounds the corner, opting to sit with his back to the windows but -

He goes to shovel some of the scrambled eggs on his toast when he looks up. He jolts a little when he suddenly sees Jack right by the table, as if completely unaware that Jack was only a step or two behind him. The candidate blinks once at him, but Jack somehow -

Finds his gaze torn away from his face to the boundless mountains around them, his eyes drifting over the snowcovered, stardusted landscape just beyond the glass.

Even though his focus is on the mountains, Jack notices through his peripheral vision how the other candidate’s eyes linger on his face, startled expression growing faintly curious as he watches Jack -

“...It’s nice here,” Jack says gently, finding that somehow - his wit has put itself on pause for this moment. The other candidate watches him, saying dryly, “Well...if you can get past the injections and whatever else they have planned for us -”

He turns, tilting that gorgeous dark gaze over the mountains, lips curving into a genuine, sweet smile as he agrees, “Yeah, the view’s not bad. Least they could give us, right?” The candidate grins at Jack, and everything about him is warm and welcoming, inviting and invigorating -

Exciting.

“I always kinda thought there was nothing to see out in Idaho,” Jack grins back, setting his tray down across from him and sliding himself onto the bench on the other side, “But I guess this is where all the true wilderness is, huh?”

The candidate assesses him calmly, before he raises a skeptical eyebrow, turning those gilded obsidian eyes down towards the rest of the table -

Where some of the other “early risers” have...paused their conversation to look at them -

Their gazes curious but a little bit...closed off.

Jack follows the other candidate’s focus and suddenly -

He flicks his own gaze to the other candidate’s right wrist, upside down and barely visible over the hem of double sweatshirt sleeves:

[Soldier: 24 - Gabriel Reyes].

Pieces click into place in his head like magnets -

And the realization hits him like a brick wall hits a fucking speeding truck.

“Oh,” Jack says suddenly, struggling to scramble to get himself away from the table, “I’m not supposed to -”

But the other candidate - Gabriel? - shrugs nonchalantly, pushing some scrambled eggs on his toast,
saying loudly and overly-casually, “Nah, ignore them.” After he says that, the other “senior” Special Forces soldiers turn their attentions back to each other. Gabriel (?) gives Jack that wry, incredible grin again, chuckling, “Non-regulation, remember? Don’t let us intimidate you.”

A guy who called my dumb jokes “cute” is pretty far from intimidating, Jack considers, pausing to watch Gabriel (?) thoughtfully, before he settles himself in and replies with a renewed sense of humor:

“Well, they look intimidating...but you on the other hand…”

Jack gives him a smug, shit-eating grin.

Gabriel (?) returns it with an unimpressed, deadpan expression before he lilts dryly, “Alright now, smartass - don’t make me give you a-hundred push ups for that mouth of yours.”

“...Wanna see me do them one-handed?” Jack taunts right back, his grin only getting wider. Gabriel (?) takes a bite of his eggs and bread, and then looks at him thoughtfully, as if actually considering it, before he asks almost genuinely, if a bit thickly with the food in his mouth, “...All one-hundred?”

And Jack has no fucking clue where he finds this bravado -

But hot damn -

Does he find it

As he teases Gabriel (?) with a coy, near-flirtatious tone:

“Command me and find out, sir.”

Gabriel’s (?) eyes grow wide and he nearly chokes on limp scrambled eggs and dry toast, hacking and coughing as he struggles to swallow his food and his shock -

And god -

The power of flustering the Most Attractive Human Being Ever stirs something fierce in Jack’s blood, sending a thrill through his veins.

Gabriel (?) starts to recover, about to open his mouth to say something, when Jack smirks even deeper, adding on in a low, but encouraging tone, “I’ll do a lot of things if you want me to, sir…”

Gabriel (?) almost reels from Jack’s quick verbal one-two, completely stunned like a deer in the headlights, eyes wide. But he recovers after a split second, a smoky, heavy look glinting across his eyes and Jack almost wonders if this is too much for like -

Meeting a total stranger on like -

The second day in the program.

But then -

“Oh shit - ¿qué es esto, qué es esto?” a new voice says brightly and cheerfully and smugly over Jack’s shoulder, practically singing with self-satisfaction. Jack glances up to see another candidate standing there with his own tray of breakfast - he, too, has sun-tanned skin, a bold, warm smirk, and vibrant eyes that gleam, as if he’s just caught them stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

Gabriel’s (?) expression immediately turns deadpan again as he mutters, “Learn to read a mood,
“Ah, Gabriétilito!” Carlos practically giggles, rounding the corner to playfully whap a fist against Gabriel’s shoulder, “Look, someone who actually tolerates you!”

“You tolerate me,” Gabriel snarks with dry humor, as Jack stifles a chortle, but a squeaky “Gabriétilito” escapes his lips, causing Gabriel to shoot him a sarcastic, teasing glare, his lips betraying him as they turn up just enough at the corners to indicate an impulsive smirk.

“Ah, Gabi, I tolerate you because I have to,” Carlos says, still practically dancing his way to the other side of Gabriel. He drops his tray onto the table and shimmies into the spot next to him, grinning at Jack but saying to Gabriel, “No puedo creerlo - only the second day, and you’ve already made a friend! Hey, Luisa!”

There’s suddenly another presence by Jack’s shoulder, and he glances up to see a tall but stocky woman - her long dark hair pulled back into a high ponytail, skin pale but blushed faintly peach on her cheeks - look over them with mild disdain. Carlos, however, is undaunted by her chilly appearance, laughing jovially, “Look, look - Gabi actually made a friend!”

“Oh my god, Carlos,” Gabriel groans exasperatedly, and when Luisa turns her dark gaze on Jack, he beams at her brightly, saying, “Hey!”

“You don’t have to be friends with him,” Luisa says dryly, even though there’s a wry smirk on her face. She flutters past Jack to slide herself in next to him, across from Carlos, chuckling lowly, “But Gabriel does need all the help he can get.”

“I don’t deserve this,” Gabriel grumbles, tilting his head back and covering his face with his hands. Though muffled, they all hear him mutter, “I came here to escape the mafia and the drug lords - start a new life, be clean this time -”

The other three laugh, but Jack manages to cough out, “Well, I wouldn’t exactly call us ‘friends’ at this point -”

Gabriel removes his hands from his face, giving Jack a horrified, almost betrayed expression as Carlos and Luisa wheeze with laughter. Carlos hacks out, “Holy shit, Gabriel - you ain’t even passed the ‘friend test’ with him yet -”

“I like him,” Luisa says, elbowing Jack lightly, before teasing Gabriel, “Can he replace you in the squad?”

“We’ve only known each other for five minutes,” Gabriel says to Jack with wretched horror feigned in his voice, “And you’ve already broken rank and stolen my position??”

“Rank doesn’t always equate to talent,” Jack grins at him and Gabriel looks appalled, but there’s a light, bright gleam in those beautiful dark eyes and -

“Oh my god,” Carlos continues to wheeze, wiping tears from his eyes as he sob-laughs, “It is too fuckin’ early to be laughing this hard. You got a name, kid?”

“My name is John, but I hate it, so please call me Jack,” Jack says to Carlos and Luisa breezily, but he gives that twisted, shit-eating grin to Gabriel, taunting him, “But it’s sir to you, Gabe.”

Carlos howls with laughter, nearly falling off the bench as Luisa chokes on her bread, hacking and coughing and laughing. Gabriel scowls, but his whole face alights with a bold, deadly, beautiful radiance, as he grin-glare at Jack with a wry, liquid viciousness, muttering, “Man, you’re fuckin’
“GABE,” Carlos sobs, slapping Gabriel on the back a few times before he basically curls up against Gabriel’s left shoulder, crying, “Oh my god, he called you ‘Gabe’ - and ‘it’s sir to you -’” Carlos breaks down into incoherent giggles as Luisa starts to recover, elbowing Jack lightly as she grins, “They obviously didn’t torture you enough in Q-Course if you’re cracking these kinds of jokes.”

“I dunno,” Jack hums back cheerfully, starting to reach for his own eggs, “Some people respond to stress with humor, after all.”

“There’s humor and then there’s...whatever you’re doing,” Gabriel chuckles, before loosely trying to shrug an octopus-ing Carlos off of him, muttering dryly, “Suéltame, cabrón -”

“...You shouldn’t insult your new CO, Gabe,” Carlos taunts back as he slips off of Gabriel’s shoulder. Carlos breathes deeply a few times before grabbing at his food again, and Gabriel shakes his head disapprovingly, sighing, “Dios dame paciencia -”

“I prefer it when God gives me strength,” Jack states happily, smirking as Gabriel gives him another deadpan look. Jack grins smugly as he adds, “You know, so I can do all those inevitable one-handed push-ups Gabe’s gonna give me.”

“Good God, you just don’t stop -” Gabriel starts to say as Carlos once again almost chokes on his food and laughter and Luisa nearly spits coffee everywhere.

But there’s that brilliant, bold gleam in Gabriel’s eye and the slightest, most enticing smirk on his lips -

As the sky begins to lighten into a wash of rose gold behind him.

And yeah -

Jack won’t forget this view anytime soon.

-------

Let me introduce myself
My name's whatever you want it to be
I like the way you hold yourself
And I'd like you to be holding me
I could be the man who chases you hard
Or I could be the one who's got the head start
Let me introduce myself
I'll be whatever you want to see
So, what will it be?

-------
It’s a few hours short of being two full days since the battle at Deadlock Gorge.

That’s nearly a full forty-eight hours without any real sleep.

Reaper flops over on his back, feeling hot and prickly and - shockingly - angry. He lies in bed in the boring heat and stares up at the boring, gunmetal grey ceiling above him, the room dark and long and full of shadows, full of thoughts - bitter and long and full of shadows.

It’s been nearly forty-eight hours

And he can still feel Jack’s throat in his hands.

Technically, he doesn’t really need sleep, not in the way he...used to. “Sleep” is merely a formality at this point. It’s more like his awareness slowly drifts in and out, in and out, like he’s laying on his back atop the ocean - moving slowly, slowly, drifting to God knows where, wondering if he’ll wake up in the same place

Or even in the same frame of consciousness.

He’s never certain of that.

Not after the Swiss Base.

He’d considered the bed and the room something of a formality on Talon’s part as well, but even if he didn’t really “sleep” the way most people did, lying there is still...generally comfortable, he supposes. Maybe.

Okay, not really.

In fact, he hates being still.

He hates the buzzing in his head, in his heart - the dull throbbing of Jack’s arteries beneath his palms, the feeling of his windpipe constricting and constricting and the blood glittering on the steel tips of his fingers and -

There’s the brush of soft, gentle fingers on his cheek -

Reaper jolts himself upright, snarling in frustration and hatred and pain, such pain, why did everything hurt, Jack, everything hurts, everything hurts -

FUCKING FUCK, he screams to himself, to the buzzing, to the throbbing in his palms and the fingertips on his cheekbones as he hurtles his pillow across the room at the door, Fucking stop, fucking be quiet, fucking GO AWAY.

The scars on his face burn a little as he untwists his features from the anger, sighing and rubbing at his eyes with exhaustion.

Ay, Dios mío.
He doesn’t remember what he used to use as an outlet for this frustration, this anger. He supposes he must have had something, but no matter how far back he pushes his memories, he can’t think of anything.

Oh.

He hasn’t had an outlet.

Not for years.

Wonder if that’s part of the problem, he thinks dryly, staring at the pillow slumped against the door. There was a time when he used to box, or go for a run, or smash buttons on a controller at some shitty game, or let a set of strong, warm arms and soft whispers hold him gently -

Nope.

Not going there.

I DON’T think Widowmaker is going to cuddle you, the voice inside says pithily and Reaper snorts at that one. The thought alone is fucking absurd. He pulls up his knees and hisses a bit at the pain in his back. He hasn’t had anything to...consume since the battle of Deadlock, and while he can go several more days in a low energy state before needing to drink more life or death, he can feel the tendrils of pain snaking their way up his back, from the scars, from the rebuilt muscle, from the reknit vertebrae -

Gentle fingers glide along the high arc of his cheekbone and -

With frustrated grunting, Reaper pulls himself out of bed, soft ribbons of smoke following after him like the ghost of hands begging him not to leave -

JESUS FUCK, GET OUT OF MY HEAD.

He grabs the loose pants and sweatshirt he’d found in the closet - both “tastefully” stamped with the Talon logo, but he supposes he should be grateful the claw image is on one of the pant pockets and not on the ass, even if the latter would be fucking funny - and yanks them on, growling at the shadows in the room and the traces of fingertips on his cheek.

He heads to the door, grabbing at his mask and snapping it on. He kicks the pillow out of the way and punches the electronic door lock, causing the door to slide open. Drawing up the hood, he skulks his way down the semi-lit hallway, not really sure where he’s going or what he’s gonna do when he gets there, he just knows he doesn’t want to be in that fucking room full of thoughts, bitter and long and full of shadows -

The Zaragoza base isn’t really...busy, per se. They could copy the Watchpoint blueprints all they want, but they would never copy the liveliness of them - well, back when they had been active. The Talon agents would occasionally engage in chatter or talk amongst themselves, and Reaper supposes some of them have to be friends or some shit, but the vast majority mainly seemed to stick to themselves, appearing primarily in the training rooms and cafeteria.

So despite his anger and buzzing frustration and the throbbing in his palms - or perhaps because of it - Reaper is mildly surprised to see that a light is on in one of the little lounge rooms, or break rooms, or whatever they are. And despite his anger and buzzing frustration - or perhaps because of it - he can’t help but peek in.

Inside is a little kitchen thing - a sleek thin refrigerator in the corner, a small counter and sink, a little
microwave and water boiler, a couple of small tables tucked in the other half of the room.

Reaper doesn’t think he’ll ever be over how fucking *domestic* it is in this damn base.

But that’s not what catches his attention.

Iñigo is sitting at one of the tables, a steaming cup of something in front of him - he’s slumped back in the chair, one hand wrapped around his stomach, the other rubbing at tired eyes, which appear dark and sunk with exhaustion.

Someone else is having a sleepless night too.

Reaper steps softly into the brightness of the room and Iñigo jolts a bit at his sudden appearance, eyes going wide with shock and he twitches a little before sighing.

“*Buenas noches,*” Reaper grumbles at him, and Iñigo nods, muttering the phrase back, but as his eyes drift they stop, and he mumbles, “...You have feet.”

Reaper glances down at his bare dark grey-brown feet, and tilts his head at an angle before growling, “What the fuck. You got a fetish or something?”

“I - no, that’s not - I just…” Iñigo stammers awkwardly, his dark eyes jerking up to the mask frantically, “It’s...not what I was expecting.”

“You thought I didn’t have feet?” Reaper asks curiously and Iñigo groans, sliding his hands across his face, “Nooo, I did not mean that - I just meant - ah...no sé, I don’t know.”

“Did you think I wore that fucking combat suit to bed?” Reaper says and he’s mildly surprised to find himself chuckling.

He pads his way over to the fridge and Iñigo watches him with slight discomfort obvious on his features. Reaper cracks the fridge open - he’s not really sure why, he doesn’t really need to eat or drink, though it doesn’t really hurt him either - and glances around. There’s some fruit, some cheese, a bottle of cheap wine, and some -

*Well, fuck me.*

He pulls out the bottle of beer - it’s a cheap ass Spanish brand, which means it’s gonna taste like piss - but it would be better than nothing tonight.

He turns around as he assesses the label, closing the refrigerator door with a foot, and he seats himself at the table across from Iñigo, who is now watching him with a curious expression.

“...I don’t sleep with the mask either,” Reaper chuckles again, and Iñigo starts a little at his voice, but mutters, “I...I did not think that you did.”

“Says the guy who thought I wore combat boots to bed,” Reaper says with cold mirth in his voice, lifting his left hand. Smoke wraps around his index finger and thumb, covering them in hard steel, and he cracks off the cap with a quick snap.

“...You truly are not human,” Iñigo whispers with a bit of awe and horror and Reaper shrugs a little, replying, “I mean, I got toes and everything, so I think technically I still am.” He forms a small straw out of smoke and plinks it in the bottle -
“A straw?” Iñigo asks incredulously, “¿Va a beber cerveza con una paja?”

“I may not sleep with the mask on, but I’m not taking it off for this shitty ass beer,” Reaper snaps, bringing the other end of the straw to the hole over his mouth. He draws up a sip and joder -

It tastes fucking awful.

Should’ve gone for the wine. Spain always has good wine.

“...Does the mask matter that much to you?” Iñigo ask curiously, and Reaper -

No tienes pinche idea, cabrón.

Reaper shrugs.

“Branding or some shit,” he lies as Iñigo snorts, taking a sip from his own steaming cup - tea, Reaper realizes, seeing the little tag over the side of the mug. Reaper watches him closely, assessing, thinking bitter and long and full of shadows before asking:

“How old are you?”

“...Thirty-five,” Iñigo replies, although the exhausted look on his face ages him ten years in the hard lighting of the room. Reaper sips obnoxiously at the beer before asking just as obnoxiously, “So you just didn’t want a normal job or is terrorism just your thing?”

Despite his obvious exhaustion, or perhaps because of it, Iñigo gives him the flattest stare - flatter than the beer itself - but he sighs anyways, “What the fuck do you know, tío?”

“I know this beer tastes like shit, so you obviously didn’t join for the drinks. I don’t imagine Talon’s got great health benefits but y’all got a fuckin’ jacuzzi so I could be wrong about that too.”

Iñigo rubs at his forehead, mumbling something in whispered Spanish and Reaper just continues to sip at the beer - Jesus, it just tastes so fucking bad - until the man groans wearily, “Will you stop that noise?”

The slurping stops - “Depends - ” resumes for a second, and then stops - “Are you gonna answer the question?”

“Joder, sí, just stop, please, it’s been hard enough to be awake, I don’t need you adding to my problems,” Iñigo scowls at him, before sighing, “You’re American, right?”

“So I hear.”

“Ah, your country had it bad in the Crisis, but we did too,” Iñigo mutters, and Reaper scowls, saying, “I thought Germany and the Czech Republic got the worst of it out here?”

“Sí, sí, es verdad, but Spain - we had a small one - a little Omnium, up in Vitoria-Gasteiz,” Iñigo continues, shifting his fingers around the mug uneasily, “When the United European Defense came, it was crushed easily, but...it was never a priority.

“So they came very late into the Crisis.”

...Oh.

That said a whole treasure trove of stories right there.
Iñigo taps at the mug as he thinks, says absently, “I was very little during the Crisis - I just remember my family was always on the move, always running. Iruña still had its walls, so we defended the city for years, but the siege lasted so long. People were so hungry, there was so much death.

“Spain - it did nothing. It said it was coming to help, said that it could not break their lines, but I think they wanted to starve us. Most of us thought that. We were not very many before but after the Crisis? Ah, it was the destruction of us.”

“...the Basques?” Reaper asks softly and Iñigo nods, his eyes hard and distant and lost in bitterness and length and the fullness of shadows.

“It seems like once a century something comes along that tries to destroy us, but we are resilient - we are born fighters. Omnis, Spain, the European Defense - they all tried to put us into history, but we survived, and we will survive the next century too.” Iñigo takes a drink from his mug, his face relaxing at the warmth of the tea, before continuing, “Many people were furious at our treatment, but we were so weak - what could we do that had not been done before? Some wanted us to stay with Spain, to wait for the reconstruction to come; some wanted to bring back ETA; some said we should just rebuild on our own.”

Iñigo shakes his head, snapping, “The money from Spain never came. Even when the United Nations tried to provide relief, it all went to the south. Thieves, liars, all of them. Decades of struggle, nothing. Overwatch - they only came once, brought some mechs and pushed some buildings around, but they were so focused on other things. Nobody cared.”

...Oh.

Reaper remains silent, full of thoughts, bitter and long and full of shadows.

“I joined because even though people brought back ETA, they could do nothing. They were weak - what good did throwing cocktails at cars do? Nothing, nada. When Talon came, they actually did things, lots of things. Corrupt Spanish politicians died, places were bombed, they brought help. They offered things.”

“...Are there a lot of Basques here?” Reaper asks quietly and Iñigo nods, adding, “And Catalans. Spain wouldn’t even put money back into Barcelona, hijos de putas. Lots of French Basques too - they were even worse than us. France is a piece of shit too.”

They sit in silence for a moment, Iñigo contemplative and Reaper shifting awkwardly in his seat - fuck me, never been good at this kind of shit, this was always Jack’s work -

Gentle fingers brush against his cheek and he shudders at the touch.

“...So what you’re telling me is the health benefits are good,” Reaper jokes weakly, but Iñigo just snorts at that, drinking from his mug, before saying, “As long as I stay alive, I make good money. I send it home. Sometimes, I’m even allowed to go home for a week or two. My money makes sure aita gets his medicine and my parents can afford an apartment in Iruña so they stay close to our family.

“I hurt some people, but they deserve it,” Iñigo states with cold hard finality, bitter and long and full of shadows.

Reaper thinks of some of the American soldiers, dead on the cracked pavement surrounded by high sandstone cliffs.

He remembers a Helix Raptora Mark VI flier, falling from the sky.
He sees Hernandez drop dead, face down into the road.

He feels a throbbing beneath his palms as his hands crush a windpipe that weakly mutters -

“Gabriel.”

Gentle fingertips touch his cheek -

“The reckoning draws near,” Reaper says - bitter and long and full of shadows - raising his beer towards Iñigo, “And people will get what they deserve.”

His hands around his throat.

His claws into his skin.

His shotgun to his chest.

The other shotgun to Gabriel’s head -

But not before he sees that watery glow again.

Iñigo eyes the beer, glancing judgmentally at the straw in it, but he sighs and clinks his mug against it anyways, before adding, “To the next century.”

The two men - bitter and long and full of shadows - drink to the sleepless night

One which is bitter and long and full of shadows.

“...Wow, this turned into a real shitshow,” Reaper grumbles after he finishes his drink, and Iñigo rolls his eyes, sitting back with a frump. Reaper sighs, “Amigo, I was trying to get away from the bad thoughts, not find some more.”

“Mira, there are bad thoughts everywhere. In here, though, there is tea. And terrible beers.” Iñigo squints at the beer before muttering, “You should have picked the wine.”

“Yeah, that was my bad.”

“Well, next time you know,” Iñigo decides, as if that settles the matter, and Reaper eyes him then asks, “Why are you even here anyways? Isn’t tea when you’re trying to sleep a bad idea?”

“It’s chamomile,” Iñigo states, as if that explains why he’s drinking it at three in the morning on a sleepless night. He hesitates a little, though, but admits, “And I’m here because every time I close my eyes I see all those American soldiers.”

...Oh.

“...My bad?” Reaper offers and Iñigo snorts in derision. Reaper points a finger a him saying accusingly, “I thought you just said you were fine with hurting people.”

“Hurting people, sure - I didn’t say I was okay with seeing them gunned down in the streets,” he states, as if that explains the difference between the two categories, and Reaper waves his hand mockingly, “Details.”

“...How did you even do that?” Iñigo asks him, curiosity inking into his words as Reaper sips noisily at the straw. He mulls over how he wants to answer him, before shrugging, “Don’t really know. Just can do it.”
“...You truly are not human,” the other man concludes with more certainty, and Reaper wonders if he just screwed himself over somehow, but he drawls sarcastically, “I have feet though.”

“So does the Devil, if you believe he fell from Heaven,” Iñigo counters, which, Reaper has to admit, is actually an okay point.

“How do you know I’m not the devil?” he chuckles as Iñigo finally finishes his tea. Setting the cup down, Iñigo looks straight at his mask before smiling tiredly - the bitterness and longness and fullness of shadows fading a little with the expression - as he says, “The Devil would have picked the wine.”

As if that explains the difference.

As despite the anger and buzzing frustration and the throbbing in his palms -

Or perhaps because of it -

Reaper laughs.

It’s a hard, harsh, grating sound - broken and ashy, bitter and long and full of shadows - but it’s true, it’s genuine, it’s real - deep in his chest and in his scars, in his rebuilt muscles, in his reknit vertebrae -

It’s what he deserves, on this sleepless night, bitter and long and full of shadows.

Iñigo gives him a sleepy, knowing grin and rises, shuffling over to the sink where he chucks the teabag into a trash bin and rinses the mug out under the faucet. He places in a corner of the counter, and Reaper sees that there are several other mugs there, plus regular cups, shot and wine glasses.

Other people have sleepless nights too.

“Buenas noches, señor segador,” Iñigo says as he waves on his way out the door. Reaper absently lifts a hand in his direction, before relaxing back into the chair.

Sleep is merely a formality.

As is eating and drinking.

As is pretending to be human.

But on sleepless nights - bitter and long and full of shadows -

Sometimes,

Those are the things he deserves.

--------

Oh Father, tell me - we get what we deserve

Oh, we get what we deserve.
And way down we go
Go go go go go
Oh, way down we go
Go go go go go
Say way down we go
Way down we go.

You let your feet run wild
Time has come as we all - oh - go down
Yeah but for the fall - oh, my
Do you dare to look him right in the eyes?

Cause they will run you down, down til the dark
Yes and they will run you down, down til you fall
And they will run you down, down til you go
Yeah so you can't crawl no more

Chapter End Notes

Song: "Way Down We Go" - Kaleo (Youtube)

Can you tell I've lived several months outside of Pamplona-Iruña?

Also, Blizzard, please give me Talon Sweat-clothes Reaper and Widowmaker. Please. I'm not asking for much. Let them wear comfortable clothes.
Overwatch: The Undeath of a Hero

Chapter Summary

News breaks than an old commander is still alive.

A speedster stops in her tracks.

A surgeon revives the truth in her heart.

A sharpshooter starts putting pieces together.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! Today was quite busy ;_; Have a special double-chapter upload!

Song is "Light of Day" by the Silent Comedy (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: The Undeath of a Hero

O children, lost in the night

O children, lost in the night

Wait for the light of day

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Speedster: Well That Just Happened

Friday, July 3, 2076: 3:05 p.m. - London, United Kingdom

She’s trying to decide if she should deliver the last set of parcels or get a snack when it happens.

It’s a bright, clear day in London, and Lena loves that - she loves all things sunshiny and bright, puffy clouds in the blue sky and a bit of warmth in the air. Course, she appreciates rain too, and fog - she does live in London after all, she has to respect the colder weather, it’s a British pastime or something, national holiday, something or the other - but really, she prefers when it’s sunny, makes the day more enjoyable, makes deliveries fun, keeps her feeling fresh and energetic.
Course, there’s not much that doesn’t keep her energetic, but that’s just how the world works for Lena.

She’s whipping around the street - blinking forward forward forward forward - it’s a li’l bit dangerous, probably, but she’s very good at it: she dodges in and out of people, occasionally jumping out into the bike lane when it’s clear, and then jumping back onto the pavement, rushing forward forward forward. The bundles of parcels slung in her pack bounce along with her, blipping forward forward forward, even as she reaches back to grab the next one -

A snack might be kinda nice, she thinks as her fingers grab the small box, Getting rather hungry right now - OOPS.

The package slips from her hands as she blinks forward, and she skids to a stop before hitting the reverse -

Esrever eht gnittih -

And she pops right back to where she’d last blinked - several people around her gasp and step away, but Lena ignores them, bending down with a cheerful chirp as she flips the parcel back in her hands.

“Cheers, luv - thot you could escape, didja?” she chuckles at the little box, spinning it in her hands to glance at the address and - ugh.

It’s on the other side of the Thames.

...Snack first then -

“This is a breaking news story from the BBC’s associated syndicate Atlas News,” declares a somber voice somewhere in the vicinity, and Lena flips her head back and forth, looking for it, when she spots it - an outdoor holo-projector being displayed on a local pub’s patio where there are people munching away at lunch or havin’ a drink on their break. She darts over, wheeling herself to a stop as a small crowd of strangers pause to hear the news as well. On the screen, a formal-looking dark haired man adjusts his papers and sets a firm but solemn look on his face before launching into his story:

“Atlas News is reporting that an anonymous source from the United Nations has provided them with previously undisclosed and possibly classified information regarding the accident that occurred at Watchpoint: Geneva five years ago - ”

Almost nothing slows Lena down

But this

This certainly does.

Her breath catches in her lungs as if she’d just teleported forward forward forward forward a split-second too fast and her heart pounds against her ribcage, beating out against the chronal accelerator strapped to her chest and her grip on the parcel tightens as low levels of chatter start amongst the crowd, which is growing bigger by the second -

The image displayed flips to images of documents and a picture of Watchpoint: Geneva - bright and gleaming under the sun, picturesque even - as the man’s voice continues:

“Atlas News states that they have numerous forensic and political experts analyzing the veracity of the information, but that as of right now, the majority of it appears to be legitimate, and a few other
anonymous insider sources have confirmed to Atlas News that the information is correct.”

Lena thinks her mouth is hanging open uselessly as the image switches to large text that the man reads:

“The United Nations’ official statement on the explosion at Watchpoint: Geneva states, ‘The United Nations and all of its representatives are deeply saddened by what occurred in Geneva. We are conducting a formal investigation into the situation and hope to resolve the issue when we have more information. At this time, we do not believe there to have been any internal issues or problems that led to the accident, and will be looking into the structural integrity of the building leading up to the accident.’

“However, this new set of information reveals that there were, in fact, numerous internal issues within the organization of Overwatch, and its covert operations organization Blackwatch.”

Images of Jack and Gabriel - the kind of formal, posed images that many organizations have for their personnel identification - appear on the projection, alongside more document scans and Lena claps her free hand over her mouth - she hasn’t seen them in years, hasn’t even seen images of them, has tried to hide from the sorrow and the horror inside her

But it reaches out now, rooting her to the spot, dragging her away from the freedom and the wind and the rush of time moving forward forward forward forward to carry her into the past where she is -

Tsap eht otni reh yrrac -
So afraid
So alone
So empty
Trapped without even her own conscious, forward forward forward-thinking mind to help her and the despair -

“Several of the documents reveal that Blackwatch Commander Gabriel Reyes made a number of formal and informal petitions and complaints to Overwatch Strike-Commander Jack Morrison, describing the mishandling of information and the misconduct on part of both Overwatch and Blackwatch agents. In the year preceding Overwatch’s formal disbandment, allegations of corruption and abuse were leveraged against both Overwatch and its sub-division Blackwatch, and while the United Nations claims to have conducted an intense investigation on these matters, many of the answers are still classified. However, Atlas News’ political experts are saying that the allegations may in fact be justified based on these memos.”

No.

NO.

Today is BRIGHT and SUNSHINY and Lena -

Lena will NOT let time take it from her.

She jerks her hand away from her mouth, setting a fierce look of determination on her face. She shoves the parcel back into her bag, before snapping a hand to her wrist and hitting the second button on her communicator.
“Among the documents are a number of eye-witness reports detailing the internal activities within Watchpoint: Geneva on the day of the explosion. Several of the reports state that Strike-Commander Morrison and Blackwatch Commander Reyes were seen engaging in a ‘heated argument’ that resulted in a physical altercation -

The communicator is ringing, ringing, ringing -

C’mon, Lena does not have the time for this!

“While several more eye-witness accounts state that were were numerous Overwatch and Blackwatch agents exchanging gunfire with each other within the building. One report states there was the presence of heavy weaponry and that ‘it was almost a battle - or even a full-on massacre’ -”

The communicator clicks and -

“She?” the voice that comes out is low and rumbling, and Lena feels a root of sadness grip her at the shock and hurt in it and -

“Winston! I take it you’re watching the news, luv?” Lena asks, trying to move to the edge of the crowd. There’s a massive amount of people gathering now, and the news ripples from the front to the back as the information is carried outwards, from those who can hear to those who cannot.

“I...I am. Hang on, Lena, I have Angela and Fareeha here too - let me connect you - ”

“Cheers, luv - I haven’t talked to them in ages!” Lena replies as cheerfully as she can, fighting off the inertia, trying to get herself going again -

Trying not to feel lost in herself.

His voice alone helps, anchoring her to the present, keeping her tied to her time, his time - their time. Right, that’s right -

She is not afraid.

She is not alone.

She is not empty.

She is full of life and time, brightness and sunshine, speed and energy and daring - she will move forward forward forward, escaping the clutches of the past that try to drag her down, drag her backwards backwards backwards.

There’s another click on the communicator and -

“Hullo, Angie, Fareeha!” Lena says as cheerfully as she can muster and she hears Fareeha grumble out, “Hey, Lena,” as Angela whispers, “I cannot believe - who would do this??”

“That’s not the issue here!” Fareeha’s voice comes back sharp and angry and so full of hurt, “Why did the United Nations LIE to us? Why did they HIDE this?”

“You cannot possibly zthink,” Angela demands in a furious tone, “Zhat Gabriel had anything to do with zhis!”

“IS THAT NOT WHAT THIS IS IMPLYING?”

“Angela, Fareeha, PLEASE,” Winston says, struggling to calm them down, but Angela fires back,
“We have no idea what Jack and Gabriel fought about -”

“A ‘physical altercation,’ Angie! They were fighting each other!”

“They were trained soldiers,” Lena chips in, “They fought each other a lot!”

“They SPARRED together a lot, Lena,” Fareeha snaps, “That is not the same as fighting each other!”

“Has anyone been able to reach Rein or Torb?” Lena tries to interject, desperately trying to shift the subject away from the awful, tragic implication -

*Gabriel did this -*

“Perhaps one of them knows something -” she continues but Winston sighs, “I have not tried calling Torbjörn yet, but Reinhardt and Brigitte have been offline in the Black Forest for a few days now. Last they told me, they were heading to Eichenwalde so Reinhardt could visit Balderich’s resting site. I don’t think they are in range of communications -”

“So they haven’t even heard yet??” Fareeha asks shocked, and Angela murmurs, “Oh no…”

“This will crush Rein,” Fareeha whispers, “Oh, Allah, he’s going to be devastated -”

“What are we going to do?” Lena asks, but before any of them can answer, a cool, electronic feminine voice - Athena - speaks:

“Please, everyone - the news caster is saying something -”

Now too far away from the holo-projection at the pub, Lena puts the communicator closer to her ear and hears the same BBC anchor speaking in truly solemn, miserable tones:

“The most shocking piece of newly revealed information, however, is almost beyond belief - the British Broadcasting Company considered withholding this information on account of it being seen as fantastical and more speculative than true news, but Atlas News has confirmed with numerous anonymous sources that this information is, in fact, accurate.”

The man takes a deep breath, before continuing somberly:

“According to the final report sent to Atlas News, Strike-Commander Jack Morrison was never formally confirmed dead within the United Nations.”

Lena feels the world come to a crashing stop.

It is so quiet, so still, so unmoving, all she can hear is the pounding of blood in her ears and a soft, horrified whisper - she thinks it’s Fareeha - saying, “...What?”

“This report comes as a tremendous shock to not just our news agency, but several the world over - both Overwatch Strike-Commander Jack Morrison and Blackwatch Commander Gabriel Reyes were given public ceremonies honoring them as deceased a week after the explosion at Watchpoint: Geneva. Both events were broadcast here at the BBC, and both men have memorial graves in the U.S. Military cemetery of Arlington, Virginia. Both ceremonies were officially hosted by representatives of the United Nations, and publically led by their surviving companions of Reinhardt Wilhelm and Torbjörn Lindholm -”

“This is a lie, this cannot be true, I don’t believe it -” Fareeha is murmuring over and over and over,
and Lena chokes back a sob, her eyes unfocusing, the past coming to drag her backwards backwards backwards -

Winston gives a hard, shuddering sigh, saying, “If...if he’s not dead, then where - ”

“HE HAS TO BE DEAD.”

Fareeha’s voice cracks with bitterness and anger and hurt, such hurt, such betrayal -

“How - HOW COULD HE NOT?”

“Fareeha - ” Lena says, but it sounds like a sob because she too -

The despair drags her backwards backwards backwards -

How could he leave them?

“How could he still be alive? Why didn’t he TELL us? Why wouldn’t he come back? How could he do that to Rein, to Torb - to US?? How could he…” Fareeha’s voice falters, breaks, and Lena can feel the edges of time claiming her, claiming them all, “…how could he do that to us?”

There’s silence, save for some sniffling over the communicator - or maybe that’s Lena sniffing, she’s not sure, she has to snap her protective goggles up to wipe away her tears because

How could Jack leave them?

“...They are saying his body was not found in the rubble,” Athena’s voice says softly over the communicator, but Lena thinks she hears the grief in the AI’s voice too, “The total for those dead and injured in the explosion is still unknown but - ”

“Winston.”

Lena pauses because

She’s never heard Angela sound that...harsh before. The doctor sounds…

So angry

So alone

So unafraid.

She sounds -

“Is zhis line secure?” Angela asks, her tone is dark and bitter and filled with a righteous fury, and they’re all quiet in shock before Winston stammers, “Y-yes, Athena is monitoring all of our lines of communication right now - no one else is on this, and no one is recording it.”

“So only Lena is exposed right now?”

“Uh...I guess?” Lena mumbles, rubbing her eyes, “I am out and about in London right now, luv - oh shoot, I was supposed to finish these deliveries - ”

“Is anyone watching you, Lena?” Angela asks, her voice still hard-edged and Lena gulps, “Uh, no, I mean, I’m on the street, but no one’s paying any attention - are you alright, luv?”
“...No.”

“I think we got that, dear,” Fareeha says cautiously. “Is...is something wrong? I mean...besides the obvious?”

“Fareeha my love, that is EXACTLY what is wrong,” Angela states with brutality to her words and God, Lena has never heard her like this before, and Angela seethes, “Zhis ‘anonymous source’ - they are not from within ze U.N. - not truly.”

“...How...how do you know?” Winston asks hesitantly, and Angela takes a big, exhausted, furious sigh before saying angrily:

“Because of course Jack’s body was not found at ze Watchpoint -

“His last known location was at my hospital.”

---------

Is your weak and shattered will
Pouring tears down your face?
Is the burden of your guilt
Crushing you under the weight?

O children, lost in the night
Try and do right, open your eyes
O children, Lost in the night
Wait for the light of day

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**Stabsarzt: Not a Miracle Worker...Not Always**

Friday, July 3, 2076: 6:09 p.m. - Oasis: City of Science, Iraq

Angela almost snaps her pencil in half when the anchor states Jack’s body was never located in the rubble of the Watchpoint.

Because that wasn’t true.

His body had been found -

His still living, still breathing body had been found -

By her paramedics.
How long?

How long would the United Nations continue to hide the truth?

How long would they pretend that nothing had happened to her hospital?

How long would they act like half her staff had not been gunned down in their own halls, in their own rooms, defending their own patients?

And why had the anonymous source said nothing

About her?

Her sorrow, her anguish, her fury boils over - she has kept her promise, has hidden her truth from her friends, from her family, from the people who have only ever shown her love and respect and trust - none of which she deserved, none of which she warranted -

But she had promised to protect them from the terror of the truth.

She had sworn before a United Nations panel - before the representatives of the world that she - fragile, tiny surgeon-soldier that she was - would be the shield for her friends and family against the dangers of the truth, the horrors of the truth - that needle and thread and nanoboosters would not be enough to doctor together a wall between their grieving, aching hearts and the miserable violence that had cut at her hospital, at her staff, at her commander -

But she would use staff and pistol and suit - body and soul - to become the wall herself.

And yet

And yet the United Nations had let the truth rot, had let it decay in darkness, had let it decompose into adipocere and bones and maggots -

They had locked the corpse of the truth away, inside their classified files

And inside her - body and soul.

And how it had rotted away at her - first there had been the rigor mortis as it had settled inside her, hard and resolute, sinking like a treasure she would give her body and soul to hide; and then the liver mortis, when it had begun to burn her, to eat away at her, to turn her own blood against her as it shamed her with time; and then the bloating, where it had ballooned inside her, becoming larger than life, consuming all she was, swallowing her hope and happiness and sadness.

And now

The decay.

Her decay.

But she is tired - so tired of rotting away along with the truth, so tired of hiding it, as if she were guilty of its murder - it had been ugly, and terrifying, and threatened to destroy her world and her friends and her family, but now?

Now what could it do?

It was dead.
...That is

If she did not revive it.

*The United Nations will know,* the cadaver of the putrid truth whispers at her, *They will know you have broken your promise - you are sworn to secrecy. You are sworn to hide me and bury me.*

...But it is already out there - only parts of it, bits and pieces that tell half of a story, like someone found the limbs and assumed to know of the whole death just from the extremities.

But Angela has the body.

And fixing broken bodies -

That is her specialty.

*Verzeihung.* Forgiveness.

In her mind’s eye, she sees them - lying in pools of blood and rifle shells, their white coats stained red, riddled with holes and rips and tears, their eyes unfocused and their souls -

Golden and bright and beautiful like the sun itself -

Evaporating, rising up like a mist to drift away from her.

*Verzeihung.* Forgiveness.

In her mind’s eyes, she sees it - lying in stains of fat and oil, the skin and tissues slipping off of it, the bones beginning to show, flies swarming it, its soul -

Her soul -

Golden and bright and beautiful like the sun itself -

Evaporating, rising up around her ribs, catching on her heart, to try and escape out of her trachea.

*Verzeihung.* Forgiveness.

*Das war nicht meine Absicht.*

Such was not my intention.

There will be no escaping the repercussions.

Fareeha will be furious with her - she will possibly never forgive Angela for tearing down the wall and showing her the ugliness; Winston will be shocked - he will be quiet and contemplative and questioning, but he will never find the answers, for she has looked for them on her own and found none; Lena will be heartbroken - she will feel lost and adrift in time and space, as she does when the fabric of her world tears around her, and Angela will have no solutions for her pain; Reinhardt will be silent - he will fall into his internal grief, wide and deep as a chasm, one which her Valkyrie suit cannot fly her across; Torbjörn will be bitter - his anger burns deep inside him, like a molten core that will rage when he comes to learn the truth; Jesse -

Jesse will break again - he will disappear without a trace into the dust and sunsets of the world,
leaving her behind, leaving her alone.

Genji will…

Genji will be the only one to understand.

Genji will be the only one to comfort her when she revives the truth.

Genji will be the only one to tell her she did the right thing.

Verzeihung. Forgiveness.

She has been a coward for the last five years - she has been hiding the body of the truth under secrecy, in her body and soul, letting it rot inside her, claiming she was protecting her friends and family from the terrors of the world while in reality she was only trying to protect herself, protect her own fears, hide her own sorrows.

But Jack and Gabriel, all of her nurses and doctors, Fareeha and Jesse and Genji and Winston - they have taught her to be brave, they have shown her strength in the face of sorrow, compassion in the face of terror, heroism in the face of blinding, harsh truth.

In her mind’s eye, she readies her Caduceus staff - the one that Gabriel had encouraged her to build, the one that Torbjörn and Winston had helped her construct, the one that Fareeha would patiently listen to her ramble on about, the one that Jack had helped her protect from the greed of the world, the one

The one she would defend - body and soul - to use on the truth

To revive it

And to protect it.

Helden sterben nicht!

The light restores the soul -

The pencil snaps in her hands.

Forgive me, my loves - I did not mean to let it get this far.

Angela sighs as she looks back at her screen - Fareeha, looking confused and hurt and terrified; Winston, looking shocked and nervous and tense; Lena’s little soundwave, dancing up and down as she waits anxiously for Angela -

As the world waits anxiously for Angela.

“...What do you mean, ‘his last known location was at my hospital?’” Fareeha asks, sadly, so sadly, so confusedly, and Angela cannot face her, cannot look at her properly. She sets the broken pencil down on her desk. She folds her hands, steeling herself, steeling her anger and rage and sorrows, as the truth -

Its skin flaps up, its bones slide back into place, its muscles knit back together -

Its fingers twitch -

“...My paramedics found him,” Angela states - her words almost don’t feel like her own, they belong
to someone else, someone she should have been five years ago, “They brought him to my hospital in
an ambulance. They did not know who he was at first - they were not able to take his biodata until
he’d been subdued at the hospital, and he had been wearing a suit for his interviews with the U.N.
commission.”

Though she is not looking at them, Angela can sense the shock rising amongst the three - four,
Athena is there too, her bright blue logo visible in the corner of the screen - of them, but she -

The light sews the skin flaps together over positioned bones and reknit muscles, stitching them
together with glowing needle and thread -

The head spasms, the chest cavity rises steeply as it

It breathes -

And she

She soldiers on.

“My secondary chief of surgery, Marcia Helmsman, performed ze surgery on him. I was still at ze
Watchpoint, trying to save people, when she called me to tell me that ze paramedics had brought him
in, and zhat his surgery to correct his broken ribs and punctured lung had been successful - ”

“You knew?” Fareeha asks and - there it is. Angela shuts her eyes at the sound in her - the sound of
pain, the sound of betrayal, the sound of justice and anger rising, soaring through the air to deliver
her the repercussions she deserved. “You KNEW Jack was alive and you didn’t tell us??”

“...No, I did not know.”

“But you just said - !”

“Ze reason I did not know,” Angela states, hard and angry and fierce - a voice that is not hers, a
voice that belongs to something beginning to breathe inside her, “Is because zhere was a massacre at
my hospital not three minutes after I ended ze call with Marcia.”

From its hollow depression inside her

From within its grave

The resurrected truth rises.

At this, Angela looks at them, angry and bitter and broken in body and soul as the spirit of fury -
righteous, indignant fury - as Eir, the Valkyrie of Mercy, rises from the grave of the truth in her heart
and consumes her. Fareeha looks as though Angela has slapped her across the face, wide-eyed and
horrified and hurt, so hurt, and Winston looks like someone has shocked him with his own Tesla
cannon, his jaw slung open. Lena’s little audio wave chirps up:

“I...Did you say, ‘massacre?’”

“Half of my staff was killed by - I do not know - Talon members and Blackwatch members and even
Overwatch members, or so ze survivors say. Jack was never found - ze commission thought that
they took him, carried him off and - ” her voice cracks, the truth is ripping at her from the inside,
screaming its fury to get out, get out, release the Valkyrie, let her go, “ - I failed him, I failed them, I
failed Gabriel, I failed you all - they took him, I do not know where he went, what they did with him - ”
“Why?” Fareeha asks, sorrow breaking her voice and Winston pulls off his glasses to rub at his eyes, “Why didn’t you SAY something to us?”

“...Ze commission - they swore me to secrecy. None of you were here - Geneva was a war zone that day - the Watchpoint was attacked, yes, but so was my hospital, and several representatives, and ze Geneva archives, and ze train station. Ze commission - they were terrified zhat ze group would retaliate, zhat they would attack other Watchpoints, zhat they would bomb ze headquarters in New York. All ze information was classified to prevent ze spread of chaos.

“Zhis...person, ze one who leaked the information - they do not have everything, they do not have it all - ze commission - I gave them my recording of my call with Marcia, I gave them ze forms she filled out about Jack’s surgery, I gave them ze names of everyone who died - my staff, half of my staff…”

Angela struggles to keep herself upright, keep herself resolved, as Eir claws her way out of her body and soul, but she can’t, she’s shaking, she wishes Fareeha were here with her, here to hold her, here to comfort her and stroke her hair and tell her to be strong, be strong, but she cannot be strong, she is weak and small and fragile -

And the truth inside her is so large, larger than life, larger than the world -

It would consume all, it cannot be contained -

It would bring the war, the battlefield - it would bring ruin and destruction and Ragnarok itself -

And she would be there, to watch

Watch as heroes and soldiers and scientists and doctors and visionaries and oddities and friends would fall -

“Oh, Angie, luv…” Lena’s voice drifts in across the communicator as Winston gives a big heaving sigh and Fareeha -

Fareeha is silent.

“So Jack is...Jack is probably dead,” Winston says, but his deep voice is shaking with the words. Angela nods, but she cannot speak - because the truth of Eir has claimed her, claimed her voice, claimed her words. There is an uncomfortable silence all around as they contemplate -

“ملاك”

Malak

Angel

Angela’s words catch in her throat as Fareeha’s voice comes across the screen to hold her, to comfort her, to tell her to be strong, be strong -

“...ملاك, I am...I am so sorry,” Fareeha whispers soothingly and Angela - she cannot look at the screen, she cannot face them, she cannot face her, she cannot face Eir, screaming and sobbing inside of her. She buries her face in her hands, feeling the tremors take over her as well.

“They,” the sound comes out as a breaking sob, “They died to save him, they died to save people - they were only doctors and nurses - they did not - they did not - ”
“Angela, they - they died doing what they dedicated their lives to,” Winston tries to reassure her, but Angela, Angela

She is being consumed

Consumed by the grief of Eir.

“They died to help him and Talon came and killed them all anyways - ” the words are stolen from her voice by sorrow, and she rubs at her eyes, leaking tears, aching with the pain she has tried to hide. Fareeha’s voice comes across, gentle and feather-light and wonderful, such sweet wonder:

“Is...Is this why you closed your hospital?”

Angela nods into her hands, mumbling weakly, “I could not...I could not work zhere - I knew, I knew they would want me to keep working but I could not - after all zhat blood, their bodies - I could not - I could not protect Jack, I could not save them…”

“Angie, luv, they - they would have wanted you to keep practicing,” Lena’s voice chirps up as cheerfully as she can muster, but Angela hears her flagging under the weight of the truth, “Your - your research is important! Definitely, but your own hospital - it woz such a big deal, Overwatch’s hospital - you did so much work!”

“I am...I am still working, Lena,” Angela sighs, removing her hands from her eyes. It’s true - she is working.

She never stops working.

Not when there is so much to do.

So many people to save.

So many truths to protect.

“I know, Angie, but -” Lena starts but stops and they all pause because

There’s a ringing of a voice call message.

All of them wait with baited breath until Athena says quietly, “The line for this call is not secure, Winston.”

“Location?”

“...It is an unregistered datapad using global Lucheng Satellite technology to connect with us,” Athena explains and Winston hesitates for a moment before saying to them, “No one says anything until we know who it is.”

“Affirmative,” Fareeha states fiercely and Lena says, “Gotcha, Winston!”

Winston presses something on his screen and -

There’s the click of something connecting and -

“...So d’y’al know Jack Morrison was alive?”

And Angela -
Angela sobs out loud, “JESSE.” Fareeha is shouting something and Lena is whooping and hollering and even Winston gives a sheepish grin and even Athena is saying calmly, “Hello, Jesse McCree.”

“Uh, hey y’all - God DAMN, how many o’ ya are there on this phone? Y’all havin’ a fiesta or somethin’?” Jesse’s voice drawls over the connection, and Fareeha is snapping happily at him, “Where have you BEEN?”

“Oh shoot, sis, I’ve been all over the damn world at this point, you’re gonna hafta be more specific than that - right now I’m in Santa Fe gettin’ some breakfast and whadya know, the news over here is saying that Ol’ Pops Jack is still kickin’ it - ”

“Yeah, Jesse, uh, Angela believes he’s actually dead,” Winston starts to explain but Jesse just says in that soothing, slow, meandering way of his:

“Nah, I’m like...ninety-three-percent certain he’s alive, ‘cuz I’m pretty sure I met him in Deadlock like two days ago.”

“...WHAT,” Fareeha demands and Angela shares a concerned glance with Winston but Jesse states:

“Yup, feelin’ pretty confident that Soldier: 76 guy is Jack. Motherfucker even had the gall to insult me in Spanish - can y’all believe that?”

--------

With your courage wearing thin  
Your enemies are at the gate  
And their voices screaming shrill,  
Give it up and run away

O children, lost in the night  
Try and do right, open your eyes  
O children, Lost in the night  
Wait for the light of day

--------

Sharpshooter: Back in the Saddle Again

Friday, July 3, 2076: 8:14 a.m. - Santa Fe, New Mexico

He immediately regrets makin’ the call.

Not just because he’s barely been in touch with them over the years ‘sides messagin’ Genji once or twice a week, although that doubly contributes to the shame and embarrassment and agony of talkin’ to them again -
But also because there’s like fuckin’ five of them on the line, like it’s some sort of goddamn conference call or business meetin’ and fuck, Jesse ain’t never been good at those.

Jesse doesn’t know how he managed to do it but this time he ain’t even walked into trouble on this one - Nah.

He fuckin’ called it on his damn phone.

Jesse slumps his head in his hands and groans as a jumble of five voices burst from the datapad’s speakers all at once.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa there - easy up, y’all, I’m in a diner gettin’ breakfast at eight in the mornin’ - y’all can’t just come at me like this,” Jesse sighs to them, scratching at his scalp.

Gettin’ back to Santa Fe had been a real peach - Jesse had done the trip to and from Deadlock Gorge many times in his life, and this latest round had been no different - simply walk out to where the ol’ highway meets the better-traveled one, grab a bus to Santa Fe, and presto-chango, he was back in action. He’d decided to stick around and visit some of his favorite haunts - his favorite bars, favorite restaurants, even his ol’ favorite game corner and arcade, where he used to play the shootin’ games as a li’l punk back in his misspent youth.

He’d stopped by Pa and Mamá’s graves, brought them flowers and everything, left them a bottle o’ whiskey and stories of some o’ his more recent escapades.

He’d spent some time at Tesuque too, catching up with some of his mother’s cousins, swapping tales of more recent adventures, getting chided on his bad Tewa because he didn’t “practice enough.”

He figures later today he’d catch an evenin’ train to El Paso, and cross the border into México tomorrow and then -

Then it was off to investigate LumériCo.

That could take him a damn long time, what with how many locations the company had scattered across the country.

But Jesse’s in no rush.

...Well, at least he hadn’t been.

Until the news had come on this morning.

He rolls his eyes as the chattering winds back down, snapping a quick-fire message to Genji, beggin’ his friend to call him up and come help him out because Genji could handle the other five with fuckin’ ease, Jesse had no idea how the cyborg ninja had managed it - he got along swimmin’ly with Angela, he could challenge Lena to a race and stand a decent chance of winnin’, he could engage Winston in in-depth conversations about his latest project, he could play games and spar with Fareeha - hell, he could even out-aim Jesse at times, them damn shurikens were downright evil in Genji’s hands.

Perhaps the craziest thing of all, though

Is that Genji had some strange, deeply personal relationship with Athena which literally no one knew when it had begun or how it had developed or what the exact nature of it consisted of.

All the li’l familia knew is that Athena and Genji were in regular - almost daily - contact with one
another since the lost soul had found his way to the Shambali Monastery in Nepal

And that somehow

Athena had been the one to have gotten him to go there.

But she refused to spill the beans.

Much to Jesse’s surprise, his datapad chimes as a message comes in and huh, he swipes the email open - the surprise is because he’d sent like four or five messages to Genji in the last seven minutes and this is the one Genji responds to?

From: Jesse.McCree

Subject: fuck

Oh shit everyone’s on the line fuck me what the fuck, fuck me sideways on a donkey, shit even Lena’s on the phone, GENJI HELP

---

From: Genji.Shimada

Subject: fuck

I will not fuck you sideways on a donkey. Tell them all I said hello.

---

DAMMIT, GENJI.

Damn cyborg ninja and his dry-ass sense of humor, tearin’ Jesse down when he needed him the most. Jesse rapidly taps out an angry, vehement response:

From: Jesse.McCree

Subject: fuck

DAMMIT GENJI WHAT THE FUCK DON’ LEAVE ME HERE TO SUFFER GENJI

---

He furiously hits send and groans again, thinkin’ maybe he should just hang up -

“JESSE MCCREE.”

Fareeha’s voice is hard and sharp and angry as a hot knife left out in the sun and Jesse feels it stab
straight to his heart because she sounds more and more like Ana - only with less of that motherly “I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed” tone and more of a sisterly “I’m not disappointed, I’M FUCKIN PISSED” tone instead.

He’s beginning to realize that this might be the reason why Gabriel and Jack never tried to piss off Ana.

Fuckin’ hell, the only person who ever had the gumption to stand up to Ana on a semi-regular basis was goddamn *Torbjörn*, and that’s because the tiny Swedish engineer literally lived off pure fuckin’ spite and anger alone.

Or so Jesse was convinced.

Supposedly Torbjörn had a very nice wife and some very nice kids and a very nice house and -

“Jesse McCree - what in the name of GOD were you doing in Deadlock Gorge two days ago?” Fareeha demands, having overpowered the other four (which, Jesse supposes, isn’t terribly hard considering Angela, Winston, and Athena have always been soft-spoken, but overpowering Lena in terms of talkin’ is somethin’ of a feat), and she continues, snapping viciously, “And HOW did you run into Soldier: 76 out there?”

“...I mean, it’s really a confidential military matter?” Jesse offers, hopin’ to kinda weasel his way outta the liability of having damaged major U.S. military property and also having shot a bunch of people, but Fareeha - having lived around Jesse the majority of her life - doesn’t buy it worth a damn:

“I am aware of the nature of what occurred at Deadlock Gorge two days ago,” she states in her authoritative voice, “Because I was there.”

Jesse’s pretty sure he hears his brain break a little bit.

“...What? No...how? I mean - OH FUCK,” Jesse swears, because his brain is startin’ to recover and shit, god *dammit*, how had he fuckin’ missed that -

Helix.

Helix Security had been there.

Helix Security’s Raptora squad had been there.

Helix Security’s Raptora squad

Of which Fareeha Amari is the lieutenant

Had been there.

“Oh Jesus Christ, *mierda*, fuck, you were in one of them jet suits,” Jesse moans, dropping his head back in his hands and god *dammit, god dammit*, fuck Jack and Sombra and fuck his own goddamn self for gettin’ him into this boiling hot water of trouble and he fuckin’ *swears* he hears -

He frowns because

The line has gone dead-quiet save for the sound

Of Angela gigglin’.

“...Angela, my dear,” Fareeha mutters sourly, “I would like to know what is so funny about this.”
But Angela just laughs harder and god, Jesse feels the pain and guilt in his soul sigh and relax and ease up just at the sound.

He has missed her.

He has missed them all.

“...Eh, wot - wot am I missin’ here?” Lena asks with some confusion, “I mean, first we woz talkin’ ‘bout Geneva and then Angie brought up a massacre and now we’re talkin’ ‘bout Deadlock and I am so confused, luv’s - ”

Fareeha sighs, but states, “So two days ago, my Raptora squad was put on a mission to escort a U.S. military delivery from Mexico to the old Watchpoint in Grand Mesa, but the Deadlock Gang ambushed us in Deadlock Gorge and the entire mission was a horrific failure and - OH, ALLAH, I FORGOT - ”

“...Forgot wot, luv?” Lena asks patiently, as Angela slows her gigglin’, mumblin’ to herself, “Mein Gott, Jesse - I cannot believe you were there.”

“Angie, please,” Jesse groans but Winston asks, “What did you forget, Fareeha?”

The line is quiet and then Fareeha whispers with quiet horror:

“I have been so focused on Aizad’s recovery I forgot - oh Allah, what the hell - Angela, Winston, there was a Talon squad there and they had snipers - they had some crazy snipers but - oh hell, their leader was the Reaper - oh my god - ”

“WHAT,” Winston snaps as Angela gasps and this time, Jesse is the one who feels lost, asking, “Uh...is this the Grim Reaper?”

“AND NOW THE GRIM REAPER,” Lena shouts with exasperation, “WHY IS NO ONE EXPLAININ’ NUFFFIN.”

Winston is ramblin’ something and Angela sounds like she might be sayin’ sumthin’ and Lena is still shoutin’ nonsense at the top of her lungs and Jesse just growls at all of them:

“Will someone PLEASE explain what the hell is goin’ on?”

“If I may,” Athena’s calm, relaxed voice speaks over all of them, “Summarizing our shared knowledge may be best for everyone and provide us all with the clarity of mind to formulate a plan moving forward. Is this okay with everyone?”

Jesse mumbles his assent as do the others and Athena begins her explanation:

“I will begin with the events that occurred last week: on Saturday June 29, the Watchpoint at Grand Mesa, Colorado was broken into by the presumed-American vigilante called Soldier: 76. Despite the restrictions of the Petras Act, Winston and I monitor many of the still existing Watchpoints, and I was alerted of the security notice when the break-in occurred. At the same time, Helix Security’s headquarters in Cairo, Egypt received the same notice, and Fareeha was brought to awareness of the developing situation. Angela had already been speaking with Winston at the time of the alert. The four of us monitored the vigilante’s behavior through the security cameras within the Watchpoint.

“During this time, Winston and I shared our analyses on three separate groups around the Mediterranean that are also conducting break-ins and assaults on Watchpoints in the region - the first is an unknown individual taking primarily medical supplies and leaving no dead; the second is
probably Talon, taking supplies, information, and technologies and leaving many dead; and the third
is an individual mercenary called ‘The Reaper’ by online sources, who takes only information and
leaves extremely high rates of dead behind him.”

Jesse frowns at the description, taking a long sip from his cup of coffee, and Athena continues:

“Winston and I were alerted to the presence of the Reaper about nine months ago when we returned
to Watchpoint: Gibraltar and we first monitored his break-in at the Watchpoint at Cyprus. What we
saw was...beyond scientific explanation, and we shared our findings with Angela and Fareeha.”

“Wot does that mean, ‘beyond scientific explanation?’” Lena asks, and Fareeha sighs, “He...he
turned into smoke and disappeared, only to reappear in another room surrounded by guards but
he...he gunned them all down in a matter of seconds. It was…” She stops, because words cannot
describe the sheer horror of what she had witnessed.

But Jesse stops and stares blankly at the datapad before him, because

Fuck.

...He had seen that at Deadlock two days ago.

He leans back in the booth seat, running a hand through the scruff of his beard as Athena responds
calmly, “Yes, at the time none of us had an explanation for the phenomenon we had witnessed.

“Today, an unknown anonymous source - supposedly from within the United Nations - has revealed
previously undisclosed documents to the global news syndicate Atlas News. I have not had a chance
to attempt to access their servers to source the information myself, but I will try once this discussion
is concluded - however, if Atlas News is to be trusted, their political analysts and experts have
determined that the information is legitimate and accurate. To summarize this information: a number
of petitions were filed between Overwatch Strike-Commander Jack Morrison and Blackwatch
Commander Gabriel Reyes in the last few years of the organization; it is not known if the two men
managed to resolve the issues that these petitions spoke of. Other documents are eyewitness reports
of the events leading up to the explosion at Watchpoint: Geneva, including a description of Jack and
Gabriel physically fighting one another, and another description of both Overwatch and Blackwatch
agents engaging in gunfire with one another.

“Lastly, the final major piece of information revealed today by Atlas News is that Jack Morrison’s
body was never found in the rubble of Watchpoint: Geneva, and that internally, the United Nations
never declared him dead.

“However, just prior to Jesse calling, Angela informed us that this information is inaccurate in a few
critical details.”

Jesse scowls, mutterin’ lowly, “What? What does that mean?”

“According to what Angela told us, paramedics from her hospital did, in fact, locate Jack Morrison at
the Watchpoint, and brought him to her hospital, where he was given surgery on his ribs and lung.
Angela’s secondary chief of surgery, Marcia Helmsman, called Angela after the operation to report
that Jack was secure and his surgery was successful - ”

“WHAT,” Jesse snaps, but several of the other patrons snap angry glares at him, and he lowers his
voice, askin’, “Are y’all serious, Angie?”

“...Yes, Jesse, I am very serious - ”
“Why didn’t you SAY something?”

“Hey, YOU of all people have no right to say that to her,” Fareeha grumbles at him, “Last time we heard from YOU was nearly eight months ago and you just sent us all an email saying that you were in Indonesia and - I quote - ‘don’t mess with pigs.’”

“And I stand by that statement, sis - ”

“Point is, you have been so bloody uncommunicative over the years, Jesse McCree, that YOU do not get to expect us to be so forthcoming in return,” Fareeha hisses at him and Jesse feels guilt stab at him like a needle -

*Shoulda stuck around, shoulda been stronger, shoulda stayed with Gabriel, shoulda talked to Jack more, shoulda helped Gerârd more, shoulda hung out with Amélie more, shoulda been a better friend to Genji, shoulda stayed with Angela, shoulda stayed with Fareeha -*

*Should notta left his family*

*Should notta left Overwatch*

*Shoulda been a better person -*

“Fareeha, it is fine,” Angela says with some exhaustion, “I am just glad Jesse has called us. I am glad we were the first people he came to for this.”

Jesse

Jesse does not deserve her kindness.

“...Angela was sworn into keeping this information classified,” Athena continues softly, “By the United Nations commission that investigated the attack on the Watchpoint. Furthermore, the reason Angela was not aware of the possibility of Jack being alive is because a subsequent attack on her hospital left half of her staff dead, with Jack nowhere to be found - ”

“Oh holy *fuck*,” Jesse breathes, struggling to understand, “Why - how come no one knows about this?”

“According to Angela, several attacks occurred in Geneva that day, starting with the Watchpoint, but moving onto her hospital, several representatives, the Geneva Archives, and the train station. Due to the Watchpoint’s destruction, I was personally incapable of accessing the city on that day,” Athena states calmly, but Jesse thinks he can sense a trembling frustration and anger within her electronic voice, “The United Nations investigations commission believed that Talon or some other hostile group captured Jack from the hospital, and therefore, while they could not confirm his death, they were fearful of retaliation if they spread the information about what the group was capable of.

“However, Jesse, YOU are insisting you met Jack the other day during the battle at Deadlock Gorge, for which Fareeha was present. You have stated that you believe the vigilante Soldier: 76 to be him. If this is true, this changes the situation once again. Why do you consider the two men to be the same?”

Jesse taps his metallic index finger on the table for a second, thinkin’ over how he wants to phrase it, before he whispers to the datapad’s receiver:

“Just gut intuition, I suppose - ”
“That is NOT an explanation,” Fareeha begins but Winston sighs, cautionin’ her, “Now, now, Fareeha, let’s hear him out. Jesse was Blackwatch’s Second-in-Command for many years - he knows what he is talking about.”

“D’aw, Winston, I’m touched by your faith in me -” Jesse sighs cheerfully and Winston adds, “But that is NOT an explanation on its own, Jesse.”

“...Real peachy keen on all y’all right now,” Jesse mumbles dryly, before sighing and saying more seriously, “Just lots o’ li’l things add up: he’s got the right build as Jack, got the same attitudes, could speak perfect Spanish - fuckin’ mocked me at one point too. He worked like a leader, knew things without sayin’ or askin’ them...

“Hell, he was even upset that I was still smokin’ cigars now, which is like, a dead giveaway that he knew me and knew me well enough to know my smokin’ habits -”

“WHY ARE YOU STILL SMOKING ZHOSE THINGS.” Angela’s voice cuts across the datapad loud and sharp and fierce and Jesse winces as if she’s actually in the diner with him and demanding to know how he’d fucked up and he grumbles, “That is LITERALLY what he said to me, Angela, holy shit - you two were always exactly alike about this -”

“...He did practically raise her,” Fareeha relents and Winston adds thoughtfully, “He practically raised all of us, Fareeha.”

“He knew about the secret compartment in my prosthetic which, fuck, should’ve also been a giveaway because Jack is the one who suggested that idea in the first place, god damn, how did I miss all the signs?” Jesse snarls, mainly to himself and Lena asks with confusion, “You got a secret pocket in your arm?”

Jesse thinks it over, thinks about how the soldier had moved, the things he had said...

The surprising kindness in how he had handled his little team of oddities.

“...He knew that heavy pulse rifle,” Jesse continues, recalling how the soldier had held it, the ease with which he carried it, how the gun had never left his side at any point - even when he’d tripped, even when the man in black had knocked him to the ground and attempted to strangle him, “It was like an extension o’ himself - he used it like a gun, sure, but he knew the rockets on it, he used it as a shield, or a batterin’ ram - fuck, at one point he turned it down to stun and fuckin’ zapped me, the pendejo -”

“Wait, he stunned you?” Fareeha asks and Angela chuckles, “I told you ze pulse rifle had a stun setting.”

“Angela, now is not the time -”

“Yeah, he stunned me,” Jesse snaps, feelin’ angry over the mere thought, “Fuck, we were supposed ta be a team, but when I came out to put a bullet in that fuckin’ cloak dude’s head, damn soldier zapped me with a pulse shock like he was fuckin’ protectin’ the man and I’m STILL MAD about that - next time I run into him, I’m givin’ him a piece o’ my mind -”

“HE PROTECTED THE REAPER,” Fareeha shouts and Angela is gasping and Winston is mumbling something and Jesse frowns at the datapad, saying slowly, “Uh...I guess? That’s what it looked like to me, but again, I was stunned for part of that before I got my flashbang out - did you not see that dude? He like...fuckin’ smoked outta nowhere and destroyed the soldiers, holy shit, Fareeha, it was incredible - it was like watchin’ the Devil play his fiddle, just amazin’ -”
“But they - they were fighting when I saw them,” Fareeha is stammering, “They were fighting and I fired my rockets at them and oh my god - that was the soldier that ran off - I barely saw him - Mahmud tried to go after him, but he was so fast - oh Allah - oh shit - ”

“Will someone PLEASE explain wot the Grim Reaper hasta do with all of this?” Lena snaps, her cheerful patience running thin with them, and Jesse mumbles, “Ya know, I’d like ta know too - y’all mentioned him before - is this someone we should know? Because I gotta tell ya, dude ain’t quite human or something - that smoke shit ain’t natural.”

The line goes silent - dead silent - quiet as a graveyard the night before Dia de los Muertos - until finally Athena says, with a soft shaking to her tones:

“We...we believe he may be out for old Overwatch agents. He certainly has a vendetta - he has routinely attacked old Watchpoints and those with ties to Overwatch. He operates mainly around the Mediterranean, and we thought he operated alone but now - ” There is a slight pause as Athena seems to collect herself, “If what you and Fareeha are saying is true - ”

“He works for Talon,” Fareeha’s voice juts in sharply, “And they could be coming for us.”

“They have not attacked any of us yet,” Angela cautions, and Jesse snorts, “Does the other day count or just nah?” Angela falls quiet and Fareeha mutters, “He...he did let us leave the battle.”

“He did what??” Winston asks and Fareeha says sheepishly, “Well, I mean...we were out-manned at one point, and it was either try to defend the package to the death or just...leave and look for a place to help Aizad - ”

“Well, well, I’m impressed, Fareeha - you picked the team over the mission this time?” Jesse teases her coyly, and Fareeha’s voice comes across the line hard and snappish, “This is not the time for you to be joking, Jesse McCree.”

“Golly, Fareeha, you sound more and more like yer mother every day - ”

“He did what??” Winston asks and Fareeha says sheepishly, “Well, I mean...we were out-manned at one point, and it was either try to defend the package to the death or just...leave and look for a place to help Aizad - ”

“Well, well, I’m impressed, Fareeha - you picked the team over the mission this time?” Jesse teases her coyly, and Fareeha’s voice comes across the line hard and snappish, “This is not the time for you to be joking, Jesse McCree.”

“Do NOT give me that, Jesse - and you don’t even TALK to me every day,” Fareeha sighs and Angela giggles a little and even Winston huffs in some sort of gorilla laugh.

“...So wot do we do now?” Lena asks cautiously, “If this soldier guy really is Jack, how do we find him?”

“Do you know where he went, Jesse?” Angela asks and Jesse sighs, “No, lost track of him after the battle but he’s probably goin’ for LumériCo.”

“LumériCo?” Winston asks, “Why’s that?”

“They helped design the fusion bomb the U.S. military was transporting - I saw some of the blueprints,” Jesse explains, “But what he could even do against a mega-corporation all on his own? No idea.”

“...And...the Reaper?” Winston says slowly and Angela sighs, “We shall all just have to be very careful.”

“I don’t like it,” Fareeha says firmly, “We are all scattered about - this makes us easy to pick off.”

“It can’t be helped, Fareeha,” Winston grumbles, “Since they shut Overwatch down, we can’t all just...group back up.” Jesse can practically hear the scowl in Fareeha’s tone as she replies, “We don’t have to listen to them.”
“Fareeha, the Petras Act,” Winston begins but Fareeha snorts, “What do they know? People act like things have improved since Overwatch was disbanded, but look - there’s the Second Omnic Crisis beginning in Russia, military bombs are being stolen, mercenaries and terrorists run wild without control - the United Nations needs to step in again!”

“The world made it very clear,” Winston states harshly, “They did not want Overwatch anymore.”

An awkward silence falls on the line, each of them left to their own thoughts.

“...It seems as if we are missing something critically important,” Winston hums and Fareeha sighs, “We’re missing a lot, Winston. I have been given leave this weekend - I may try to find Reinhardt and Brigitte at Eichenwalde and talk to them about the situation. Rein might know why Jack and Gabriel were fighting at Geneva.”

“Be careful out there,” Angela cautions, and there’s a grin to Fareeha’s tone as she chuckles, “Please, I was raised by Overwatch’s second-in-command, the last Crusader, and an Olympic biathlon champion - the Black Forest’s got nothing on me. And Jesse?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Ugh, don’t call me that - I know you called my mother that - just...don’t be so distant, okay? It was good to hear from you,” Fareeha says and Jesse smiles at the warmth in her voice, replying, “I’ll try ta be more cooperative, but y’all know me - I’m a lone wolf kinda guy.”

“Ugh, Jesse, not that dumb cowboy stuff again,” Lena whines and Jesse snaps, “Hey, hey, I don’t insult your bomber look, do I?”

“Because it’s cool, Jesse - you got nuffin on me!”

“You wear Crocs, Lena.”

“THEY ARE SPORTS SHOES WITH EXTRA GRIP, YOU WANKER.”

And Angela is gigglin’ again and even Winston gives a strange huff of a laugh and Fareeha chuckles as Lena rambles on and on about the pros of her weird ass sports shoes and Jesse smiles to himself, because even though he’s eatin’ breakfast alone in a diner in Santa Fe at eight in the mornin’ -

He’s not alone.

Not as long as he has them.

‘Cuz no matter how wide the world is,

They’ll always take back his amblin’, roamin’, troublesome self without question.

And that, Jesse thinks, is worth puttin’ up with all the trouble in the world for.

--------

_Oooh, oooh, oooooooh_  
_Wait for the light_  
_Wait for the light_
Oooh, ooooh, oooooooh
Wait for the light of day

Chapter End Notes

The only way they'll ever solve this mystery is if they all work together.

GOOOOOO TEAM
Chapter Summary

News breaks that an old commander is still alive.

A sparrow finds a new path to walk in life.

A soloist has a strange heart-to-undead-heart with a reaper.

A soldier prepares to war with the world.

A sage struggles to deal with the fallout of her lies.

And

A shadow laughs at them all.

Chapter Notes

Listen

If I have to ask you to listen to any of these random song suggestions,

Please listen to this one.

"Through the Valley" - Shawn James (Youtube)

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Warnings: depressive thoughts towards the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Soliste: Rendez-vous avec la mort**

Friday, July 3, 2076: 4:07 p.m. - Zaragoza, Spain

She’s watching the BBC broadcast with growing horror when there’s an impatient knock on the door.

Widowmaker almost doesn’t hear it, she’s so focused on what the English news anchor is saying about the new information revealed about the destruction of the Swiss Watchpoint that she barely registers the second knock and the frustrated, now frustratingly familiar low grumble of that *salaud* - the one whose damn picture is being shown all over the world right at this very moment:

“I know you’re in there, *arañita,*” the ghost of a king growls outside of her door, “I can hear
whatever you’re watching in there...Fuck it, I’m just gonna go find that damn Basque bastard and ask him - ”

“Oui, un moment, salaud!” she snaps at him, unfurling herself from being curled up on her bed and stretching her long, sleeping limbs before striding to the door. She hits the electronic padlock and it slides open and he’s standing there -

In a Talon hoodie and sweatpants and socks and that damn mask and quoi?

“...Don’t judge me,” Reaper hisses at her, “I had a rough fuckin’ night, okay?” She arcs a long eyebrow in his direction but he mumbles, “You’re not wearing your headgear.”

“Merde, do you sleep with your mask on? Why would I wear my cameras all the time?” she zings right back and he...he just kind of nods understandingly at that one. She brushes a loose strand of hair out of her face, struggling to try and tuck it back into her high ponytail with the others, but she cannot seem to get a grip on herself today.

She does not know why.

No...wait, she does.

“Are you… ’ave you seen the broadcast?” Widowmaker asks him, struggling to retie her hair back and he just kind of lazily tilts his head at her, muttering, “You mean that shit about Geneva that they’re showing on every news station in the world? Fuckin’ tell me something I don’t know.”

She pauses, hands still wrapped in her hair on top of her head because -

“You KNOW?” she demands and he just sighs, “Of course I know - for fuck’s sake, I was there and - Jesus Christ, just let me do it.”

“Quoi?” she says to him, but suddenly Reaper grabs her by the shoulders and flips her around and she suddenly realizes what he’s doing and merde -

“DO NOT TOUCH MY ‘AIR - ”

No one touches her hair - no one, only her, only Gérard, no one alive touches her hair - no, no, no - the last time someone touched her hair she had been lying under bright lights strapped to a bed and pale rough hands had stroked the top of her head and she had sobbed, sobbed, because she had been so scared -

Gentle hands comb through the long, dark strands and she flinches, on the verge of hyperventilating but he’s saying softly, soothingly, “Bien, bien - estás bien” and she’s stunned as gentle fingers softly detangle and pull the loose lengths back high on her head, just how she prefers it, and they snap the band around once-twice, just how she prefers it - and it’s

It’s over so fast she does not know how he did it so quickly, so thoroughly, so

So kindly.

A rough, gentle hand with calloused fingertips and a hardened palm pats her shoulder calmly and she’s not entirely sure he is even aware of his own actions because he keeps talking in Spanish which she only barely understands:

“Bien, no fue difícil, ¿no? Ya está hecho, hermanita - no era malo, ¿no? Bueno, ya está hecho.”

(tn: good, it was not hard, yes? It is done, little sister - it was not bad, yes? Alright, it is already
done.)

...What the fuck just happened?

She turns around slowly, staring at him like she’s never met him before, because honestly, she does not know if she actually fucking has - who is this man, where did the other Reaper go, what is wrong with him?

How the fuck did he already get those damn claws back on, what the shit -

“Allways,” Reaper sighs glumly and - merde, is he DRUNK - she does not know what to make of him as he mumbles, “I have this kinda weird and strangely personal question to ask you.”

“...I am not sure I want to ‘ear it,” Widowmaker answers genuinely but he doesn’t leave and he just kinda stands there looking what she assumes is miserable and after a moment she sighs, “What is it?”

“...Will you - Jesus, this is fucking weird - don’t tell me I didn’t warn you, this is weird shit even for me - ”

“Hurry up, salaud,” she snaps and he holds up his left hand and -

Are those scissors, quoi?

“Alright, fuck, here it goes - will you...cut my hair?”

“C’est quoi ce bordel??” The words are out of her mouth without even meaning to say them, but she finds that they’re true anyways because what the fuck is happening -

“Oye, mira - I wouldn’t be asking you if I could do it myself - normally I’d just fucking shave my damn head,” Reaper growls and she’s pretty sure he’s not entirely sober, “But I can’t fucking do that anymore because half the time the razor cuts the scars and there’s no way I can cut this shit with scissors by myself and fuck - it doesn’t even have to look good, I just fucking hate long hair - ”

“You - you ‘ave ‘air,” she states in disbelief because she cannot remember if he ever had hair longer than a few centimeters at most and Reaper sighs dejectedly, “God fucking dammit, I knew I should’ve asked Iñigo, fuck, he’d give me shit for it but I could probably make him do it.”

“No, no - I will - merde, I will do it?” she really asks herself and Reaper seems relieved, muttering, “Oh thank God” and starts walking into her room -

“What the ‘ell, not in ‘ere,” she snaps at him and he takes a moment before nodding, “Yeah that’s probably a good idea.” He turns and meanders off down the hall and Widowmaker

Widowmaker does not know what the fuck she’s gotten herself into.

She follows after him and he turns into one of the shower bathrooms and she drifts in behind him like a lost confused puppy. Reaper holds out the scissors to her and she just ogles them for a second before taking them from his hand and what the fuck - she doesn’t know how to cut hair, what the shit is happening?

Reaper twists back around and with semi-normal ease just seats himself into a crouch and Widowmaker stares at him before saying, “Should you not get a chair?”

“Too lazy.”

“What if it looks bad?”
“I literally do not care,” he growls and then he slides his hands - still covered in claws, *quoi* - and pushes back the hood of his sweatshirt and *c'est quoi ce bordel* -

There’s long, thick, softly curling hair that falls roughly to his jawline - despite being choppy and of awful mixed lengths, it’s richly dark and full and surprisingly tangle-free? He slides a clawed hand under the band keeping his mask in place and -

Her breath leaves her as it snaps off his head -

...But the mask stays in place.

He’s holding it in front of his face -

*Like a fucking dramatic child.*

“Are you *serious??*” Widowmaker hisses at him and he snaps back at her, “I’m not taking it off.”

“‘Ow do you expect me to cut this around that??” she demands and she can practically feel his eye-roll as he mumbles back, “I said I literally do not care how bad it looks, just fucking cut it off already, I fucking hate it - ”

“But why??” she asks, because, she doesn’t want to admit it, but it is surprisingly lovely hair, even if it’s cut awfully and looks like a toddler ran scissors through it three years ago, which, given Reaper’s terrible temper, is probably exactly what happened - metaphorically anyways.

“I - I don’t know ‘ow to cut ‘air,” she stammers, terrified and he just sigh-snarls at her, “Listen, Widowmaker - I will legitimately not care - I will *never* care - how badly you cut this. You could cut me the fucking ugliest mohawk or even do some shitty-ass mullet, and I will still prefer it to anything I could do myself.”

“What if I make a mistake?” she asks quietly because -

She cannot fail

She cannot make mistakes

She cannot -

A clawed hand grips her hand holding the scissors and his low, gruff, surprisingly kind voice rumbles, “You literally cannot fuck this up. Trust me.” His hand stays there for a second, shakes hers a little, and -

She can do this.

She does not know how she knows this but

She can do this.

He will not get mad.

She cannot fail.

Widowmaker nods at him in the mirror, and his hand releases hers. She takes a deep sigh, runs long fingers through the choppy, thick waves, and grabs a clump -

SNIP.
The scissors snap shut and she releases her breath and the hair in her hand drops and -

It fucking dissolve into smoke.

“C'est quoi ce bordel??” she shrieks as the whips of ash and dust fade into the air and Reaper growls, “It happens, stay focused, cut as close to the scalp as you can. C’mon, arañita, this can be over in just a few minutes if you’re fast.”

Widowmaker steels herself, grabs another set of strands, and -

SNIP.

They too, dissolve into smoke, but this time, she is prepared for it.

SNIP.

She cuts some more.

SNIP.

Fuck, nothing is even, nothing is beautiful -

SNIP.

But it is surprisingly...painless?

SNIP.

Widowmaker eases herself into it, pulling out strands and strands, cutting and cutting, snipping and snipping and Reaper is surprisingly still, surprisingly patient, and they stay there in silence, the sound of the scissors and the soft sizzle of smoke being the only noises for a moment until -

“If you knew,” Widowmaker says softly, “Why are you ‘ere?”

Reaper doesn’t say anything - doesn’t ask for clarification, doesn’t need an explanation. He stays still for a moment before speaking in low, dark, shifting tones:

“In the weeks before the explosion...the UN put me on lockdown in Geneva. And then...some...group within them effectively tortured me, I guess.”

The scissors stop.

“QUOI?!” she stammers, almost dropping them, her eyes growing wide in horror and hurt and -

“Oh my god, arañita,” he rumbles back, almost sounding annoyed with her shock, “Shit happens. I’m pretty sure they were Talo -”

But before he can finish the word, her empty left hand smacks him upside the head.

“OW, what the fuck -” Reaper starts to snap, but Widowmaker hisses sharply, “Are you an idiot?!” before she points a finger to the comms panel by the door.

He faces away from her, but she can tell that Reaper is watching her in the reflection of the mirror, based on how his held tilts slightly in understanding.

Widowmaker stares at the hollows of the mask’s eyes, making an ugly expression at him, until he
nods slowly.

She relaxes a bit, lifting the scissors to another lock of hair, asking quietly, “So...he was...involved in that?”

“...No,” Reaper states in a soft but bittersweet murmur, “No, I...don’t think so.  But we…fought.  I was so…”

He pauses, his voice sounding like distant smoke enshrouded in whispers that are surprisingly...wistful:

“All I wanted was for him to help me.  And he left me behind to suffer.  And when the time came for us to make a decision to run or not, he wanted to stay.  He...hated the choice I had made.  The choice to save us.”

The scissors stop.

“...I only knew he was alive last week, though, but...I think I figured it out a long time ago,” the ghost of a king continues, and Widowmaker -

She does not know how

But she finds the courage to continue.

SNIP.

“...What was this...choice of yours?” she asks quietly, and he growls threateningly, “Tread this territory lightly, araña - this is a very sore subject for me.”

“...I would not threaten the one with scissors near your ‘ead,” she levels back and Reaper...assents, saying, “...You weren’t there.  I can’t explain it to you.”

“...You can try,” Widowmaker offers, combing around to the left side of his head and Reaper says cautiously, almost...nervously:

“...Things...change...between people.  Shit happens.”

She snorts at that, “Magnifique, truly inspiring your words.”

“Shut the fuck up - ”

“Scissors,” she reminds him and he shuts up, before adding:

“...Things changed when...when you left.  The mission he had changed.”

...Oh.

Him.

Not Jack Morrison -

But him -

The ghost in her mind.

His mission.
“I took it,” Reaper says, bitterly enough that the words burn but gently enough that the sorrow stings, “But Jack had...grown weaker. Scared.”

...Oh.

...She did not know that.

Reaper lifts a clawed hand, as if assessing his own obsidian-tipped fingers, murmuring with such hurt and heartbreak:

“...Do you know the quote ‘Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster -’”

‘- And if you gaze long enough into the abyss,’” she says gently, almost tenderly, “‘The abyss gazes back.’”

Silence, and -

With a voice cracking with such fury and such hurt and such heartbreak -

He murmurs:

“...I became a monster to fight monsters, and he was the only one who loved me for all that I was...but in the end, even he left me.”

The clawed fingers curl with such rage -

“In the end, he valued the world more than me.”

That the obsidian parts shatter and smoke, soft, molten gold dripping out from between the cracks like lava from the earth.

There’s the sound only of metal sliding together, sliding apart, sliding together, and the soft hiss of strands fading into nothingness as his hair falls away. The parts she has cut are ugly, short, choppy, uneven lengths and patchy, but Reaper plows on as if he doesn’t mind.

Perhaps he truly does not mind.

“He’s the one they’re calling Soldier: 76.”

The scissors pause, but resume a moment later and she asks, “If you know...should you not go to ‘im?”

“What the fuck, why would I want to do that?”

The cutting stops. She stares at him hard in the mirror and though she cannot see his eyes behind that damnable mask, she knows he is staring hard back at her.

She does not know how she knows this.

She does not know how she has the courage to ask.

All she knows -

Stand strong, mon ballerine -
Is that she must try.

“...Do you not...love ‘im?”

The silence that falls over them is deathly, so quiet that they can hear people pattering around in the halls outside, so quiet that she can hear the heft of his breathing and the struggling, quiet beating of her heart in her skull.

“...I don’t care if you fucking stab my eyes out with those piece of shit scissors - ” the voice is hard, burning, furious - like the voice of hell that she had heard in the cave tunnel two days ago, and in the mirror she sees small red irises begin to glow, and the skin on the back of his neck cracks and sizzles and there’s the smell of burning flesh in the room -

She could remove the warrior from his kingdom -

She could cut his hair -

She could gouge out his eyes -

“You will never ask me that question again.”

But he was no Samson.

His power lay not in the light, not in the strength of heaven, not in the skies or the stars - his power lay in the fury of his soul, in the burning heat beneath his skin, in the death and smoke and blood he cloaked himself in -

His power lay in the explosion that had torn him apart -

The explosion that had replaced his heart -

But she

She has never feared him.

She winds her free hand in the remaining strands of his hair and pulls on them - hard - to the side, and the reaper hisses at her, whining and seething and snapping something furiously but she snips the scissors a few times in front of his face and he quiets, though the smell of burning flesh does not leave the room.

“Do not threaten me again, cherie,” Widowmaker snarls at him, “Especially about love.”

Those red eyes glare at her in the mirror but he says nothing, and she releases her grip on the last locks and smacks him upside the head, which he titters at like a petulant owl.

“...The man you once loved is still alive,” she mutters to him darkly and she sees those red eyes widen in shock before she stands back up, squaring herself upright.

*Stand strong, mon ballerine -*

“Not all of us are so fortunate.”

“...I would rather he be dead - OW, STOP THAT - ” he snaps as she smacks him again, whispering to him menacingly, “I will leave right now and you will ‘ave to deal with this ugly ‘air for the rest of your life if you do not be quiet.”
That gets him to shut up, the smell of flesh fading from the room and the hellish glow in his eyes fading away as she stands there for a moment, deciding if she should make good on her threat and leave him with a long, asymmetrical clump of hair in the back left of his head, or if she should be kind to his pathetic ass and just cut it off.

They stay in the deathly quiet until -

“I...I did not know you...were aware of...that event between you and - uh yeah,” Reaper states lamely, awkwardly, struggling to find the right words, “And...sorry for...being an asshole. Again.”

Widowmaker snorts, rolling her eyes, “So old dogs do learn to fetch.”

“I - that’s not - yeah, sure, whatever,” Reaper sighs, and she

She feels pity for him.

She does not know why.

“...If you truly want ‘im dead,” she offers, “I am sure we can arrange for that to ‘appen.”

“Humph, how generous of you,” Reaper snorts sarcastically, but adds in a darker, more broken tone, “But he is mine.”

“Jealousy is an ugly emotion, salaud.”

“He is mine to kill, araña. Not yours, not Talon’s, not even the fucking United Nations’ - mine.”

So fucking dramatic. She rolls her eyes, and snips the last segment of hair off his head, letting it disappear into the air. Slowly, he runs his free hand - claw and all - over the short, ugly, miserable mess of his hair and He chuckles throatily.

“Ah, fuck, that is so much better,” Reaper sighs, pleased with himself as he slides the band of the mask back over his head and yanks his hood back on. He rises from his kneel, and Widowmaker stands there haughtily before tilting the scissors in his direction, and he takes them from her while saying quietly:

“Thank you.”

“Do not make this a regular occurrence,” she tells him coldly, “Or you will find those scissors in your eyes. And Reaper?”

He seems to eye her cautiously, before grumbling, “...What?”

“You will never tell me you wish Jack Morrison was dead ever again -”

Red eyes burn in the darkness of his skull mask, but she flashes her own sallow eyes at him - She does not fear him.

She bares her fangs at him, dripping venom with every word:

“Or I will take ‘is death from you.”
He may contain the raw, molten power of the sun, but
The ghost of her king has no power over her.

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Well I came upon a man at the top of a hill,
Called himself the savior of the human race.
Said he come to save the world from destruction and pain,
but I said how can you save the world from itself?

---------

Soldado: Not Dead Yet

Friday, July 3, 2076: 8:05 a.m. - Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

He’s eating breakfast - chilaquiles with an extra helping of coffee - at a restaurante when there’s a small paradigm shift in his life.

Getting here really hadn’t been all that difficult. He’d tried chasing Sombra but given up pretty quickly when he realized he wasn’t going to find her in the Gorge again. He...probably should’ve gone back and talked to Jesse - made some sort of effort - but between whatever the fuck happened with Gabriel, Sombra backing out of their deal, and the bitter, acrid reminder of his failure to help Ana, he had not been in the mood to try and explain all his miserable fuck ups to the vaquero.

The thought of Jesse reacting with disgust and fury gnawed at his heart like sharp fangs.

So he’d hauled himself back over the train car blocking the way out, retrieved his bag, and just...walked off until he’d reached the main highway and caught a bus to Albuquerque. There, he’d got a train to El Paso, where he spent the night at another small, discreet motel.

He had not slept well that night, because every time he started to fall asleep, he’d felt hands crushing his windpipe and claws cutting into his throat, and he’d seen arms with angry lines of flame scarring through them, and red eyes piercing into him through the darkness.

The next day, he’d wandered around the city gathering the last bits and pieces of supplies he needed for his crossing. He’d bought a second bag, and then stocked up on some extra food, a few spare clothes, some civilian ammo for his pistol.

He’d spent another restless night in the motel, and then, early in the morning, loaded his two bags onto his back, and literally just

Walked through the border.

Mexico, especially in Ciudad Juarez, is significantly more lenient on permitting visitors into the country than the States, even despite all the national-level security changes Portero had attempted to instill. The biggest restriction is on bringing in firearms, but pretty much no one is ever stopped for inspection, and the city as a whole is open to day visitors without any restrictions. And from Juarez,
It is absurdly easy to get into the rest of the country without concern.

So 76 had stopped for breakfast at some hole in the wall place that was shockingly open at 7:54 in the morning, ordered food, and set about pulling things open on his datapad, scrolling through the news. Unsurprisingly, the battle at Deadlock Gorge had not made any public articles, though a small piece on how one of the North American Central Railway lines had been damaged and would be closed for repairs had shown up in a local New Mexico paper.

But other than that, radio silence.

He’s not sure if that comforts or unnerves him.

*Kinda expected there to be more follow-up to that,* he thinks to himself as he shovels another bite of some *tortillas y mole* into his mouth, when the little television hanging out in a ceiling corner of the restaurant cuts away from the local Spanish news to a blaring, obnoxiously loud American bulletin:

“We have a breaking news story today on Atlas’ Morning Show - ”

76 rolls his eyes as he munches on chilaquiles, savoring the chiles and salsa in his mouth, fighting off the exhaustion that tugs at his eyes like small, incessant insects, and dips his head back to reading his datapad. Nothing major going on, although Russia, Korea, and China all inch precariously closer to another war with the Siberian Omnium: another skirmish had been fought last night on the Russian-Korean border, but the Korean government was denying that it was an official military endeavor, saying that it was merely Siberian junkers who had fought with the Omnic patrol forces.

But 76 knows the difference between what the typical Siberian junker is capable of

And what a mech from the Korean Mobile Exo-Force is capable of

And he knows that a Siberian junker does not leave fusion cannon marks on Omnic shells.

*Looks like their mechs are improving,* he considers, scrolling through the images of the wreckage, pausing to assess the fusion blast scars on the remains of an Omnic.

No one’s calling it a war yet, but it’s the third incident between Korea and the Siberian Omnium in two weeks.

And who knows how many unreported skirmishes and battles the Russians were waging with their semi-media blackout.

His stomach knots a bit in fear and repulsion.

No one’s calling it a war yet -

But it’s almost a guarantee that the Second Omnic Crisis has already begun.

*God dammit, Gabriel, I don’t know what the fuck is going on with you, but if you could drop the bad guy thing for a hot second, I’m sure the world would really appreciate it. And where the fuck have you been hiding for thirty years, Mokosh?*

He goes to pop another bite into his mouth when -

“- previously undisclosed information on the explosion that occurred at Watchpoint: Geneva six years ago - ”

His mouth hangs open for a frozen second before he lifts his head to the television in the corner.
Some of the other patrons of the place are glancing up at the screen, and the matronly hostess of the restaurante is fiddling with a remote to turn the Spanish captions on.

"- Atlas News has confirmed with an anonymous insider source that the information is, in fact, legitimate, and a number of our forensic information experts and political analysts are already working on sorting through the files."

His fork slowly dips from his hand, his grip loosening as his focus tightens on the television screen. The sharp, female news anchor continues her report:

"The majority of the documents focus on the events leading up to the explosion at Watchpoint: Geneva, along with several classified reports that were filed during the United Nations’ investigation in the aftermath. Previously, the United Nations officially declared that there were no internal issues that could have contributed to the explosion, although many political experts hypothesized that the corruption allegations leveled against Overwatch and its covert operations organization Blackwatch led to internal dissolution between the two. The majority of terrorism and anti-terrorism experts largely agree that the explosion was not an accident, but probably an assault on the base by Talon."

An image of several copies of the electronic files appears on the screen and he -

He stares at the numerous official seals and electronic signatures at the bottom, noted the massive "CLASSIFIED" stamp in the upper corner and oh holy fuck -

They’re real.

Jesus Christ.

What the fuck is happening.

"Many of these new reports show that there was, in fact, a schism between the two organizations, with a number of formal and informal complaints and petitions being lobbied on both sides against the other. Several of these reports come directly from Blackwatch Commander Gabriel Reyes, addressed directly to Overwatch Strike-Commander Jack Morrison, noting the mishandling of information and numerous problems within both organizations. If there is information that either commander made the effort to halt these internal issues, our experts have not yet uncovered it."

He’s pretty certain reality is tearing itself apart and unravelling at the seams because

What the fuck

"Further documents note that eye-witness accounts leading up the explosion of Watchpoint: Geneva report that Morrison and Reyes were seen engaging in a heated argument and eventually a physical altercation - "

What

No

That wasn’t

That wasn’t true.

Gabriel’s furious, hurt, betrayed face rips itself back into his mind and he nearly doubles over with how much it stings, how much the torn flesh of his neck aches at the thought and there are hands crushing his windpipe and claws tearing into his flesh and -
No

They had fought, there had been an argument, there had been some truly ugly words, but they hadn’t -

“I can’t fight the whole world, Gabe! We have to be better than them -”

“Bullshit.”

Gabriel’s shadow-tinted, broken voice rips through him like the very claws that had shredded his skin:

“Bullshit we do - I would burn the whole world to the ground for you!”

And his own hollow, low gravely voice asks back, stained a dark, ugly blue in the colors of his memories:

“And be king of the ashes??”

“If that is what it takes, yes!”

“Other eyewitness reports state that there were ‘numerous individuals in both Overwatch and Blackwatch uniforms fighting within the building just before the explosion.’ One account goes so far as to state that ‘they were carrying heavy weaponry, firing at each other, at bystanders - it was almost a battle, or even a full-on massacre.’”

His eyes are hardly seeing anything, his ears are tuning out the low-levels of excited chatter starting in the room, his soul is digging its claws into his heart, and his lungs, and the inside of his trachea, whispering, whispering:

You let this happen

(“Gabe...I need you to tell me what happened -”)

You brought destruction on them

(“You always did have such a high opinion of yourself - martyrdom and stardom must look so similar from the top, huh?”)

You hid the truth in your heart and ignored it

(“What the hell happened?”)

You let corruption and rot and abuse destroy everything

(“Hell happened to me -”)

(“Gabe, I'm -”)

Old

Useless

Broken

Ugly
(“You left me to suffer in the darkest levels of hell on earth and you let fear make you weak when all I needed from you was to be stronger -”)

You cannot do anything right

(“Gabriel, don’t say that -”)

You cannot make anything right

(“I didn’t need a Strike-Commander or a hero or a defender - I just needed you, but you left -”)

He hates you

They hate you

Mira, mira

Look, look

Now the whole world knows how you fell apart

And you

You did that

There are claws around his throat, tearing into his skin, crushing his windpipe and there are claws inside his soul, shredding his lungs, carving up his heart, ripping apart the bandages and scars that hold it together to begin with -

His wrists and forearms ache and burn and he -

He grits his teeth and jams a hand into his side pouch and his fingers trace over the rough wood, the not-perfectly spherical shape, and the awkward lumps and he -

He takes a deep breath.

One two

He releases it.

Three four

He takes a deep breath.

One two

He releases it.

Three four

Just like he used to in SEP, when the drugs ran deep and the pain blinded him and it was all he could do to dig his broken, cracked, bleeding fingernails into the rough, shredded mattress as he listened to the others scream and swear and spasm around him - how one of them would start counting and then another would join in after moments of only semi-consciousness and then eventually the others would count too and -

One two
He releases it.

Three four

The claws are still there - wrapped around his throat and around his heart but he -

He takes a hold of them with his hands -

*I don’t have gold to offer*

*I only have scars*

*But they don’t hurt me*

>You cannot hurt me*

*Fucking try me, just fucking try*

There’s a shotgun pointed at his chest -

He grabs the barrel -

And presses it into the fabric of his shirt, into his skin, until his broken, bandaged, scarred heart beats against muzzle -

*I cannot make things right*

*But I can try, just fucking try*

*To make things better.*

He lets go of the rough wood carving in his pack, and lets go of the shotgun pointed at his chest -

When his thoughts refocus, the chilaquiles swim back into view - a half-eaten plate of *tortillas y mole y salsa*, the fork skewed in the mix - and a nearly finished cup of coffee and his datapad open to an article on a skirmish on the Russian-Korean border, and it’s not so much that the world is *different* now - it has not shifted on its alignment, nor changed its rotation, nor slung off the laws of gravity to break away from the sun - but rather

But rather

That it has always been the same.

That it had refused to change.

That humanity had refused to change.

Overwatch had saved it from certain annihilation, from its own destruction, and yet when Overwatch had presented to it the hope for a better future -

When Overwatch had presented the revelation - the *apocalypse* - of a better world

A better humanity

The world had chosen to cut down Overwatch, to destroy heroes and soldiers and scientists and doctors and visionaries and oddities
In order to resist the forces of change.

“The final and most shocking piece of new information revealed by the documents is that despite public declaration, Strike-Commander Jack Morrison was never internally declared dead within the United Nations. His remains were never found at the Watchpoint, and the explanation for why the United Nations publically and formally declared him as deceased remains unknown.”

The soldier lifts dark, stormy eyes at the television, his scarred, twisted face set with no emotionality, his intentions unreadable and impassive and -

He soldiers on.

The world had rejected his paradigm shift

And in doing so

Had forced it inside him.

But the joke was on them

For he had always been a soldier -

Born and bred and trained and educated and drugged and broken and reassembled and crafted and warred and loved and lost and healed and hated and feared -

They’re coming for you, the claws of his soul dig deeper into his lungs, tearing at his heart, cutting open the scars holding it together anew, They’re coming for you now. Oh little soldier - soldadito pobre - where will you run, where will you hide? The world is coming to find you

And crush you.

Jack lifts the mug to his scarred lips and savors the last dregs of the coffee - bitter and dark and full of smokey acid - and he sighs with contentment as it burns the inside of his throat on the way down.

He places the mug back on the table.

Let them fucking try.

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Saoi: There Was a Flaw In The Approach

Friday, 3 July 2017: 1806 - heading to her apartment, City Center, Oasis, Iraq

Though the sun is still nestled in the higher angles of the western sky, its rays glinting out from behind the University tower, Moira feels none of the heat but instead suffers under the density of her frustrations.

My professors did always warn me that research was 99% politics and financing, she thinks, her mind feeling heavy under the Minister headgear that enwreaths her head like a crown, But I never expected that to be this literal.
The meeting of the Ministers of Oasis had stayed within their projected time, thankfully, but it had still been nothing short of an hour of messy project discussions and critiques and debates over funding and budgets. The University tower project continued to drain coffers, and while there was no shortage of support for the city of science, it was more the length of time the project was consuming than actual money that was grating on the Ministers’ nerves.

And then of course -

The inevitable clash of personalities.

“I admire all of our colleagues, but there is something miserable about listening to a group comprised mostly of men talk about projects,” a cool if terse voice - sweet like honey but enriched like oil - says next to Moira’s right shoulder, and the Minister of Genetics glances towards her associate Dr. Anya Al-Shahrani, Minister of Geology. Anya shakes her head, her own Minister headgear shimmering with the motion, as several small pieces of glass and crystal dance and sway beneath the light, saying slowly, “My mother used to tell me, ‘Anya, the only men worth listening to are the ones who know when to be silent.’”

Moira laughs a low, raspy chuckle at that, lilting back, “Well, your mother sounds like a wise woman. Mine used to just tell me, ‘Moira, the only men with value are the ones on the money.’”

“She too sounds like a woman of high regard,” Anya replies, giggling back, her sandstone skin radiant under the sunlight, graced with the deep blues and twilight purples the Ministers wear. The two of them pause at a crosswalk in front of an outdoor bar and restaurant, the sounds of the diners and the clinking and clicking of glass and utensils mixing with the slow, easy ambiance of the Oasis settling into evening. As another set of cars rush past them, Moira glances at the restaurant, asking thoughtfully, “Are you busy tonight? Should we get dinner?”

Anya follows her gaze, also looking at the food contemplatively, murmuring, “Well...I am rather hungry. I haven’t eaten since midday -”

“أخبار عاجلة (akhbar eajila, breaking news)” a loud voice suddenly chimes over the diners, as the corresponding Al Jazeerah news anchor appears on television screens and holoprojectors visible in the restaurant, “أطلس نيوز قد أعلنت للتو (’atlus niuz qad ’aelanat lltw, Atlas News has just announced) -”

“Odd time for a news story,” Anya says. Moira scowls a little, muttering, “It must be urgent then -”

أن جاك موريسون هو على قيد الحياة (’an jak murisun hu ealaa qayd alhayat) -”

*That Jack Morrison is alive.*

Silence falls over the restaurant.

The light for the crosswalk turns green.

Moira feels the small mirage of peace and quietness inside her evaporate into arid *horror -*

And then she bolts across the street.

“Wha - Moira??” Anya calls after her, but the Minister of Geology is rooted in place as Moira rushes forward, her mind *racing -*

*Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit* -
As she reaches her left hand into a pocket, gripping at her phone. She weaves her way up and around a beautiful, lush park, pulling the phone out and immediately tapping through the contacts to “M.G.” right as she reaches the base of her apartment complex.

As Moira bolts through the lobby, where other members of the complex are gawking at a television in the luxurious reception and sitting room, the phone rings and rings and rings and -

**PICK UP YOUR BLOODY PHONE, GUERRA**, Moira screams in her head, whipping around a corner to the elevators, jabbing at the up button several times. The elevator number drops maddeningly slowly, before it finally hits the ground level and dings cheerfully. The doors slide open and Moira bolts inside, smashing her finger against the “close doors” button right as -

“Fuck,” Marc’s voice hisses as he finally picks up his phone, “O’Deorain, I’m a little goddamn busy here -”

“What the absolute hell is happening?” Moira demands from her, her voice cutting like a wire, sharp and taut as she pushes the button for the penthouse suite -

“Do you think I know anything more than you do ??” Marc rasps back, “Qué carajos, what I told you the other day is basically everything I know -”

“So you CIA assholes didn’t do this?” Moira snaps as the elevator starts to rise, taking its sweet time to move -

“Of course not,” Marc seethes back over the phone, and she can hear him tapping furiously at his smartdesk as he adds, “There’s only one other person here who knows about this, and then my contact in the United Nations who informed me his body had never been found -”

Moira feels her mind crack and shatter -

“- And then you and me,” Marc concludes. There’s a bitter, furious silence both on the phone and in the elevator, until Moira states with a deadly, ugly venom to her words:

“Let me see if I have all the facts. The Strike-Commander of Overwatch - one of the most powerful people in the world at the time, an individual you had us plot to destroy - was never found or proven to be dead...and only four people knew about this before today, one of whom was only informed two days ago??”

“It’s not that simple,” Marc growls back, as the elevator reaches her floor. The doors ding open and Moira steps out, heading to the only apartment door on the level. She quickly taps her passcode into the lockpad, as Marc mutters, “There’s probably a dozen agents who know only bits and pieces of the truth who were assigned missions to monitor places we knew he could or would appear -”

“And yet, somehow, one of the most famous people in the entire world not only did not arrive at any of those places,” Moira hisses back accusingly, as the door to her apartment slides open, “He was literally never seen or observed by anyone the world over, let alone your agents - do I have that correct?”

“He’s not a Death Agent,” Marc snaps at her. Moira rolls her eyes, gritting back, “He certainly fits the bloody description though, doesn’t he?” She pulls the phone away from her ear to set it on a side table in her entry way, removing the Ministry headgear as she hears Marc’s tinny voice rattle away at something or another. Moira turns, settling the headgear on its docking station on another stand, before she reaches for the phone again -
And strides into the main room of her apartment.

It’s a fine place, regal and royal and serene, built to perfection, crafted from steel and silk and science, full of deep, tinted coppers and bronzes in the accents, the couches and chairs all smooth, dark leather matches with soft purples and faint gilded oranges. Everything is crisp, clean lines that swirl into sweeping curves and heavenly designs, isometric shapes and inlaid patterns, with a beautiful ceiling that is part glass panels open to the sky, part mosaic detailing Arabian stars and constellations. The far wall, which opens to the north but curves all the way around to the west, is glass set into cuts of eight-pointed stars and diamonds, and even from the landing, Moira can see over the city center, to the Hanging Gardens in the north end of the city, to the University tower in the west -

Where the sun continues to gleam off of its dark, cut angles and out over the rippling water of the lagoon.

She storms through the main lounge room, turning right, heading into a hallway that leads into the rest of her apartment. Her bedroom is the next room over, north-facing so that she gets a grand view of the City Center and the Gardens each day, and after that is her personal home office, arranged almost identical to her set up in the lab and her office in the Ministry building.

Moira hurls herself into her seat, sliding it right up against her desk, fingers already tapping away to turn her computer on into [SSO Mode]. With a brief pause as the computer jingle-jangles into life, she lifts the phone to her ear again, just in time to hear Marc mutter, “You’re not even listening to me, are you?”

“I wasn’t,” Moira says dryly, “Because I just got home after a long day of meetings, and I care not to hear more people blather on about failing their responsibilities. I just want your solutions to this -”

“Solutions?” Marc asks back, furious, “I just received the news - do you think I have had time to form a plan?? We’re losing our minds over here -”

“And you don’t have procedures in place in case a breach of information on this scale happens??” Moira demands, docking the phone and switch it to speaker as the computer loads. She turns to a cabinet by her desk, and pulls out a glass and a bottle of whiskey.

“Between Grand Mesa and the train,” Marc says as Moira pours herself a generous glassful, listening to him continue, “My partner and I started preparing a brief to be released internally and that was when I was going to start discussing it with the council but -”

“So you’re telling me there are zero protocols for this??” Moira demands, but Marc finally snaps back:

“What more do you want me to say?!”

Silence falls, both on the phone and in her office.

“Six years, Moira - six years!” the CIA agent half-whispers, half-murmurs, his voice cracking to the point where she can finally - finally - hear how the decades have taken their toll on him. Marc exhalles slowly, each word dripping from him like water through cracks in an endless cave, “Six years of knowing we all failed! Six years of turning over every damn rock in Indiana and New York and California! Six years of following every contact he’s ever had, hoping that at least one of them would get - I don’t know - some sort of hint from him on his whereabouts, or hell, even his mere existence. Six years of keeping tabs on his seventy-five year old mother in the off-chance he would think about her.”
Moira stares at the phone, listening to him quietly, contemplating if perhaps…

Perhaps -

They should never had “succeeded” in destroying Overwatch.

“It wasn’t until March or April of this year that I finally told myself to give up,” Marc sighs, “To let go of this…pathetic sham of a manhunt because he. Just. Didn’t. Exist anymore. Only to discover like a month later that someone had broken into Watchpoint: Montreal and taken a-hundred tiny, insignificant items that made me suspicious all over again.”

They let the silence fill the gaps between them, spaces as far as half a world away, and moments as long as the last six, miserable years. Moira stares at her glass of whiskey -

And then shotguns the whole thing.

“So -” she gasps as she clatters the glass onto her smartdesk, rumbling out, “What do we say?”

“Look,” Marc mutters, “If you want to say I lied to you - that you had no idea or whatever - I get it. They’ll come for my head and there’s no need for you to get caught up in that - we need you for so much more than this pathetic shitshow -”

“Guerra.”

The dark, devastating tone of her voice gets him to shut up -

And listen.

“I did not lie for you to the Servatores just to throw you to the wolves two days later,” Moira states bitterly, furiously, coldly, “And you owe me the life of the last supersoldier you have. So it’s time you actually play the spy you have always been and tell those miserable fools the real reason you never told them Morrison was alive.”

Stunned silence answers her, until he mutters, “And what reason was that, scientist?”

As the SSO screens load up, filling her office with blue and purple-tinted lights, Moira smirks a devilish grin:

“That you didn’t trust them all, agent - and with good reason, because someone somewhere let a thief slip into our information systems…and steal our most valuable resource.”

Almost immediately, she gets a private message box from Maximilien, and Moira’s grin deepens as she says to Marc, “Call me on the SSO private lines.” Before he can reply, she turns off the call on the phone, and opens the call with Maximilien.

“I suppose you want me to say that you are clairvoyant,” Maximilien drones sarcastically, “But knowing you, you would just take it as an insult.”

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“That you didn’t trust them all, agent - and with good reason, because someone somewhere let a thief slip into our information systems…and steal our most valuable resource.”

“I suppose you want me to say that you are clairvoyant,” Maximilien drones sarcastically, “But knowing you, you would just take it as an insult.”

“I would rather you praise my powers of observation and critical thinking than attribute that to some magical foresight,” Moira retorts, watching as the other members of the SSO load in on the right side of her screens. She pours herself another glass of whiskey before settling back in her seat, humming, “But it wasn’t difficult to figure out that Soldier: 76 had not arrived in Deadlock Gorge by mere coincidence.”

“Do you still think Guerra is withholding information from you?” Maximilien asks her, as he leans
Moira takes a sip of whiskey this time, before shaking her head and murmuring, “No...not intentionally, anyways. And I don’t think he was last time, either. But even if he is aging, well, somewhat gracefully, he is still aging, and his emotions over Morrison’s un-death have worn on him.”

Emotions and sentimentality always break one’s ability to see things clearly, after all.

“...But there are a few things Guerra and at least one other person in this group are not saying,” Moira states, her calm, cautious rage deepening, as she watches several people begin to clamor for Guerra’s explanation.

Maximilien watches her through their private conversation, before asking coolly, “And?”

“And those are...” Moira continues slowly, placing her thoughts with a careful

Controlled

Precision:

“Which one of them lost that United Nations classified file on them never locating Morrison’s body...”

Moira pauses, before adding with a gentle, wire-taut coldness:

“And either which one of them is a traitor to us...or if no one has betrayed us, which one is the weak link who made us a cunning, terrifying enemy in the shadows.”

Because Moira does not believe in chances and changing hands.

There is no such thing as luck or coincidence -

Only patterns and linkages between larger forces we must reason and ration our way through.

“...Do you truly believe one of them has sold us out?” Maximilien wonders aloud. Moira taps at the glass in her hand, before murmuring fiercely:

“No, they all love their power and prestige too much to try and back out of the group now. But someone was meant to safeguard this information...and they failed to do that. Guerra is responsible for his part of it, yes, and because he knew who Soldier: 76 always was, but...someone else knows something. Guerra was not the only person to know that Morrison was still alive, and the old war dog would never have put it in writing.”

Maximilien watches her through their conversation, but Moira’s focus is on the scrambled images of all the other Servatores members, as she says darkly:

“Someone else here had an information breach and never told us.”

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*I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*
*I fear no evil because I'm blind.*

I walk beside the still waters and they restore my soul,
but I know when I die my soul is damned.

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**Semáforo: Where’s the fun in playing fair?**

Friday, July 3, 2076: 9:06 a.m. - Dorado, México

Sombra sits back in her chair and howls with laughter.

*Ah Dios*, it had been *so easy* - she cannot believe everything had worked so well!

She’d even sent the email under some U.N. assistant’s name and email - a contact that Atlas News already knew and trusted - and slipped the documents she’d wanted to expose in without anyone even questioning it.

And now - *y ahora* -

It is time to play.

*Bring me your best!*

*Héroes y villanos, salvadores y destructores* -

*Our Lady of Death comes to play with us all!*

*And she brings with her La Guerra and all the Valkyries of old!*

What a fun game to play -

The only game to play.

An alert notifies her of a new chat being logged.

Sombra grins.

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Chapter End Notes

Jack Morrison, to the entire world: FITE ME, YOU UNAPPRECIATIVE ASSHOLES

Actual canon Jack Morrison, to the entire world: Earth, I've gone through a lot for you - hope you appreciate it.

Me: ...huh, I actually wasn't that far off.
Fun fact: every character subheader title in this chapter and the last one are actual voicelines when the characters are respawned.

Except for Sombra's.
The Tale of Genji, Part 1

Chapter Summary

A sparrow gets lost in Numbani, but he is found by a teacher.

Five years later, they return to the city, hoping to find answers the world believes are hidden.

Chapter Notes

This is all part of my long con to try and get more people into bromantic Genyatta.

Song is "Heart Hope" by Oh Wonder ([Youtube](https://www.youtube.com))

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Warning: there is a paragraph-long description of the result after the Shimada brothers' battle. If you would like to skip it, it begins with the words "- there is only pain." The rest of the story continues with the line "...Do you want to be left alone?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Tale of Genji, Part 1

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Truths Made Self-Evident

Twenty years ago, the world experienced the greatest loss of human life in a single day it has ever witnessed.

Like many who were alive for the beginning of the Omnic Crisis, I remember where I was. Like many of you, I was eating breakfast when the news broke of the surprise simultaneous attacks carried out by every Omnium in the world.

Unlike many of you, I was surrounded by eighty-three enhanced supersoldiers.

There are times when I still relive that moment - even twenty years later, it still feels surreal and strangely submerged, as if I am witnessing one of the most catastrophic events in history underwater. When our commanding officer informed us of the situation, the hall was silent with shock. And then came the outrage, the confusion, the borderline hysteria. When she turned on the television, we
watched as the Bastions and Spider units of the Detroit Omnium began destroying everything in their paths.

I remember, like a fever dream, how my friend Louisa screamed when they destroyed her family’s neighborhood.

The majority of my fellow supersoldier candidates would go on to join the different divisions of the United States’ military: many of them would actively engage in the front lines of the battlefields of the Omnic Crisis. I would see them over the next five years, in different cities across the United States, several in battles in Canada and Mexico, even a few in Brazil or the United Kingdom.

Of the eighty-four of us present in the room that day, there are only eight of us left twenty years later.

I and my supersoldier companion, Gabriel Reyes, visit the other seventy-six in Arlington National Cemetery once a year.

My fellow supersoldiers, my comrades, my friends died defending humanity in its darkest hour. They died to protect the world from the annihilation of the abyss. They died carrying the greatest of human ideals upon their shoulders: hope, honor, courage, justice. They died bearing all of humanity’s achievements, its merits, its intellectual and creative wealths, its dreams and beliefs.

They died to ensure the survival of the potential of humankind.

In the sixteen years since the official end of the Omnic Crisis, we have witnessed the truths my friends and comrades died bearing: the indomitability and resilience of human spirit, the endurance and strength of human heart, and the expression and flourishing of human creativity. From the ruins of the destruction, humankind once again revived, recreated, rebuilt, and reinvented itself with only its spirit, heart, and creativity to guide it through the aftermath. From the ashes of the apocalypse, humanity has brought forward its strongest, unbreakable truths to shine as a light in the darkness.

I am honored and privileged to write that with Overwatch’s assistance, the United Nations was able to provide the necessary support and relief to the hurt and the wounded, to provide the necessary shelter and care to the lost and the weary, to provide the necessary comforts and assistance to all.

With Overwatch’s help, the United Nations was able to extend the rights of human truths - the rights to life and liberty, equality and justice, dignity and respect, self-worth and self-determination; the rights to freedom from the scourge of war and the disease of poverty; the rights to peace and betterment - to all.

These are the truths my friends - among hundreds of thousands of others - died to protect.

These are the truths I have sworn the remainder of my life to defend.

These are the truths the entirety of Overwatch has promised to nurture.

For much of the course of human events after the end of the Omnic Crisis, these are the truths that the best and brightest and bravest of humanity upheld with dignity, honor, and pride -

But not for all.

I remember where I was when the Omnic community of Paris was brutally and violently destroyed.

I was in my office in Geneva, settling into work for the day when my assistant and friend notified me of the attack. The moment still feels surreal and strangely submerged to me, as if I was witnessing
the worst of human history underwater. I watched as peaceful, industrious, hard-working, kind-spirited Omnics of all origins, of all makes, of all shapes and sizes were horrifically beaten and broken. I watched as their shops and apartments were torched, I watched as their human friends were abused and left crippled, I watched as Omnic body parts were stolen from still-twitching forms.

I listened to the heartbreak in my Omnic assistant Athena’s electronic voice as we witnessed one of the most tragic days in Post-Crisis history.

It was a terrible, ugly display of the truth that humanity’s spirit, heart, and creativity had not been extended to all - not those who needed it most upon their defeat at the end of the Crisis, those who were forced to witness the flourishing of humankind from the darkest corners, those who were subjected to the burning ashes of the apocalypse swept from humanity’s resurrection.

This is not the truth my friends - and hundreds of thousands of others - died for.

This is not the truth I swore the remainder of my life to protect.

This is not the truth that Overwatch will nurture.

Like the scourge of war, the disease of poverty, and the chaos of the apocalypse, this is a truth Overwatch was made to break.

And so, after two long, laborious years - years of hard discussions, years of brutal debates, years of furious arguments, years of difficult compromises, years of tragic, terrible, painful healing - today, I am honored and privileged to write that those same truths that Overwatch helped the United Nations bring to all of humankind -

The rights of truths for all - the rights to life and liberty, equality and justice, dignity and respect, self-worth and self-determination; the rights to freedom from the scourge of war and the disease of poverty; the rights to peace and betterment -

Shall be extended to all of Omnickind as well.

Under the new Human-Omnic Accord Act, the privileges, protections, and rights guaranteed by the United Nations and Overwatch shall be extended to all peaceful Omnics and Omnic communities who accept and confirm the United Nations charter. The truths of life and liberty, equality and justice, dignity and respect, self-worth and self-determination will be defended, protected, and nurtured for both Humankind and Omnickind.

Truly, the rights of truths for all.

It will be a decision that will result in much backlash. It will be a decision that ripples through the currents of history. It will be a decision that will bind the two of our kinds - Human and Omnic - together from now until the end of days.

It is a decision I will swear the remainder of my life to protect.

It is a truth that Overwatch will nurture, shield, defend, and bear for the rest of its days.

It is a truth that I hope I can carry to the graves of my friends, to give to them alongside the flowers and candles, to let them know that their hopes and honors, their courage and justice live on for all, to give them and the world peace -

One that is true and eternal.
We are hope. We are honor. We are courage. We are justice.
We are Overwatch.

Jack Morrison, Strike-Commander of Overwatch
3 July 2067

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They're building towers that are high enough to see the clouds
Yet it don't bother me
The elevators working overtime up and down
Yet it don't bother me

Cause I need something more than everything
A higher self deep within
Cause I need something more than everything
A higher self, a higher self

And I know we need a little heart hope
I know we've gotta outgrow
And feel a little heart hope

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雀 (Suzume) Flashback: When the Student is Ready

July 4, 2070: 7:38 a.m. - Numbani, Nigeria

He doesn’t know why he let Athena talk him into this.
Despite Genji’s cooling system, the savannah sun blazes down on him, hot and scorching. The
incredible density of metal in the city surrounding him only intensifies the heat and the glare. There’s the constant droning of machines working to construct the buildings - it’s been a few years since Numbani was formally created by the official Human-Omnic Accord Act, but the city continues at its rapidfire growth, spreading outwards seemingly without end.

The absurd thing is that even as the city is still undergoing construction, there are already people - human and Omnic alike - who have moved into Numbani and begun living their lives here. Crowds buzz and meander around Genji like the flow of a river, and there’s the distant honking of auto horns and the whirring of hover wheels. Transport ships swoop in and out overhead across the clear blue sky.

Genji wants to die.

Sure, no one is giving him a second glance here - he’s not sure if people assume he’s a human-looking Omnic or an Omnic-looking human - but it still feels miserably oppressive to be in this skin, to be broken and fucked and simultaneously overwhelmed and underwhelmed. The city can dazzle all it wants under the savannah sun - Genji still feels like shit.

Beneath the faceplate, he sighs to himself and sets off down the winding street, brushing past strangers on the sidewalk.

He doesn’t really know where he’s going - truth be told, he didn’t really want to be here, but there’s a soft, desperate, feminine, electronic voice in his head begging him:

“Don’t do this, Genji, please, please - do anything but this - everyone will understand, please - do what you must, go where you must, but don’t do this -”

He had intended to go quietly, to go...beautifully - to shatter himself on the jagged rocks of Gibraltar, beneath the setting sun, to break himself back down into a thousand little pieces, tiny and miniscule like shattered pottery, so that no one could put him back together again, so that no matter how hard they tried, he would be whole in being fractured.

So that no matter how hard they tried,

They could never put his hatred back together.

So that no matter how hard they tried,

They could never put his pain back together.

...But Genji was not cruel enough to do it when someone was watching.

Especially not to Athena.

So he’s not really sure what he’s doing here - the urge to drown himself in the concrete some random mech is pouring just up the street nearly overwhelms him, but he wouldn’t want to fuck over the poor mech driver like that. Maybe if he’s lucky, a steel beam will fall and impale him -

Genji grits his teeth.

He’s not really sure what he’s doing here, but he’s not doing that.

He supposes some of the construction crews need bouncers or something, or maybe some big CEO who plans to set up headquarters in Overwatch’s shiny new city needs a bodyguard. Genji has a miserably niche skill set that’s really useful for one purpose and one purpose only - killing people -
but how the fuck do you find people to kill in a place called “The City of Harmony?”

Still, despite having gone through Yomi and back, having waded through the rivers of hell and hatred, Genji is not fond of the idea of killing people for the sake of money. It didn’t matter how much his father and brother and clan had attempted to stress the importance of the clan’s work - the idea had never stuck. Even when Overwatch and Blackwatch had attempted to modify the idea into “killing for the sake of peace instead of money,” Genji had felt...quite ill at the idea. He did not know how Jesse and Gerárd had stomached it, or how Angela could stand quietly amid the death and violence on the battlefield and somehow continue her dutiful work. Genji would often return from missions and retreat to dark corners in Winston’s lab, where he would let the gorilla and his AI partner babble to each other and wash away the bad thoughts in his head into a mind numbing emptiness instead.

On rare occasions, he would talk to them.

On rarer occasions, he would joke with them.

So basically, Genji doesn’t know what the fuck he’s even gonna do in this stupid city.

It’s not like he’s in desperate need of money: sure, he still has to eat and sleep and let his core cells recharge on occasion, but Gabriel and Jack had never left him for want, providing food, housing, a decent salary, medical care - Overwatch had better coverage than the Shimada-gumi, and the Shimada-gumi had never needed anything besides blind loyalty. Genji had nothing to spend that money on and had grown increasingly detached from even using it; eating only a few bowls of rice a day and drinking little more than a few glasses of water and admittedly slowly starving himself -

He did not have the appetite for anything else.

Genji blinks and -

地獄はどこですか？ (tn: Jigoku wa dokodesu ka; where the hell is he?)

He’s not in the sun anymore - his only semi-conscious stumbling has brought him to some suspicious-looking market slums on the edge of the new construction zones. People - humans and Omnicos alike - are harking strange meats and bits of metal limbs and small vials of yellow-ish biotic liquids. It is difficult to tell with the faceplate, but there’s a foreboding smell in the air - trash mixed with burning metal mixed with tar mixed with smoke - and here -

Here, people are paying attention to him, leering at him from stalls and in dark alleyways between makeshift tin buildings.

Genji does not fear them - even half-starved, his wreck of a body could still outpace any of them in the blink of an eye.

He does, however, fear for his sword - Ryu-ichimonji is the only one of its kind in the world, balancing fusion pulse technology with traditional Japanese swordsmithing, melting steel and light and energy together into a dark-emerald beauty.

He would not even let Hanzo have it, so why would he let some lowlife take it from him?

He flicks a hand over his shoulder to Ryu-ichimonji’s hilt, scanning the area. He notices that several of the eyes watching him avert their gazes at the motion - some of the weaker sellers and thieves are easily deterred just by a simple display of awareness -

“Have not seen the likes of you here before, metal scum.”
The voice is harsh and grating, and Genji tilts his head towards his left, where several tall, beefy human figures are crowding around something in an alley of semi-shadows and dusty heat. Genji steps towards them cautiously, his hand never leaving his sword - there’s five of them, of ranging heights and skin tones and genders, with three of them having some sort of banged-together metal prosthetics and the other two wearing odd bits of sheet metal as some sort of protection.

Junkers.

There are junkers the world over - the most infamous group took down the Australian Omnium and fucking blew the Outback to irradiated bits, but the loosely-tied collection of people span the globe. They can be found anywhere from Siberia to Paris to London to Rio de Janeiro, bound only by their hatred for Omnics, their immense distrust of their governments, and their ability to survive like cockroaches.

Genji does not really blame them on any of the issues.

After all, he knows all about surviving like a gross little insect.

“Indeed,” a serene, surprisingly deep electronic voice floats back, drifting past the savannah junkers to register in Genji’s ears, “It is my first time coming here.”

“Well,” one of the junkers grunts, “Sounds like you need someone to give you a welcoming tour.”

“Oh well, that would be splendid -”

“Oh,” Genji snaps at them, and the five of them turn around, parting just enough for him to see the poor tourist they’ve managed to corner -

An Omnic wearing tattered yellow pants and some sort of loose red wrap around its waist hovers behind them, metal hands placed in a lotus position in its lap. Genji does not give a shit about how Omnics dress themselves, but this one - it gives him pause. There are nine small dots on the Omnic’s stainless steel forehead, each one glowing blue with the occasional twinkle of gold, and around its neck hangs what looks to be a necklace formed of huge, golden orbs.

Genji would almost call it gaudy, but the strange contrast of the torn, dusty pants and the massive necklace confuses him.

“Leave him alone,” Genji cautions to the five junkers and a couple of them snort at him while one snaps, “What the fuck are you?”

“He is a cyborg, ugh,” another one says with cold, mocking laughter, and Genji rolls his head a little, muttering, “You are a cyborg too.”

“How fucking dare you, salaud,” one of the junkers hisses at him, smacking a fist into a metal hand and Genji notices the large, ugly cleaver hanging at the side of the tallest junker.

“Listen,” Genji says slowly, “Let us all just walk away from this situation and no one will be hurt.” The biggest junker - a tall, heavyset man with dark skin, a shaved head, and that deadly looking cleaver - gestures loosely to his group and says icily, “I do not know what you are thinking, stranger. We were just going to show our friend here a tour of the city is all.”

“良し(tn: yoshi, okay), because this dark corner is a good place to start your tour, hmm?” Genji asks, slowly stepping towards them.

Why is he doing this?
He should just walk away. There is nothing for him here -

Behind them, the Omnic tilts its head slightly and Genji -

Genji thinks it might be smiling?

The Omnic lifts a hand from its lap and places a long, thin metal finger against what Genji assumes is some sort of mouth.

...何? (tn: nani, what?)

Quick as a flash, the Omnic lashes out a hand against the neck of the nearest junker, and the woman falls, hardly even crying out. The girl next to her snaps her attention back to the Omnic, but just a fraction of a second too late - the Omnic whips a leg out from beneath it and knocks her over, and suddenly there’s an immense roar and shout from the other junkers and -

Genji launches himself at them.

He whips out Ryu-ichimonji and smacks the first one with the blunt edge of the sword before jabbing an elbow into his stomach. When the man doubles over, he smashes the fist enclosed around the sword’s hilt into the side of the man’s head, and the junker crumples with a moan. Genji twists, immediately raising the sword to block the incoming cleaver, the metal clashing together with a harsh grating sound. The tallest junker is easily twice his height and perhaps three times his weight - the man would give Reinhardt a run for his money.

But the man does not have even a fraction of Reinhardt’s battle sense.

Genji tilts his sword and the cleaver slides off, before dashing right up to the man’s space. He smacks a few quick jabs into the man’s stomach and chest - not enough to get him to fall, but enough to knock him off balance - and he deftly jumps and clambers over the junker, placing a hand on his head and propelling himself up and over. He quickly snaps a metal knuckle into the man’s pressure point at the back of his neck and the junker keels over - not dead, but just numb from the neck down. Genji lands back on his feet as the heavyweight falls into the dust, and with a clench of his fist, he pops out three shurikens from his arm compartment, raising them to aim -

The fifth junker turns and bolts down the street, shouting something incoherently.

Genji pauses for a moment before sliding the shurikens back into his arm and righting himself. Suddenly, there is the sound of multiple gears whirring and snapping and Genji whips around to see -

The Omnic has several arms out, made of gold light - they fan out of him like statues of old Hindu gods, bending about and twisting themselves and -

They clap for Genji.

Genji really has no idea what either of them are doing here.

“I uh,” Genji mutters as he watches all but one of the arms disappear, and it turns as the Omnic fist-bumps it with a real metal hand, but Genji is completely at a loss for words.

He feels entirely empty, devoid of emotions.

The Omnic floats up to him, saying in that deep tone, “That was marvelous.”
“I...thank you?” Genji stammers, feeling both overwhelmed and underwhelmed and seriously, is this a joke? Did Jesse set this up?

“You have much athleticism,” the Omnic compliments him and Genji is almost embarrassed by the sudden praise, muttering, “Oh no, that was - that was not very difficult at all -”

“Really?” the Omnic asks, “You shall have to show me how you did that jump.”

“I uh - can you even jump?” Genji asks suddenly, probably pretty rudely too, but he cannot stop staring at how the Omnic just...hovers there. The Omnic -

The Omnic gives a small chuckle at him.

“Why, certainly, I can jump,” he says, with that little bit of laughter to his voice, “I can even walk! Imagine that.”

“Does it not?” Genji asks, gesturing at him wildly, “Does it not take more energy to do that than to walk?”

“That depends on the technique used,” the Omnic says cheerfully, “Some prefer to use energy, but I? I have simply taught myself not to fall.”

Behind the faceplate, Genji just gawks at him.

The Omnic suddenly makes a small, open gesture, exclaiming, “Oh, but where are my manners? My brother would be so upset with me.” He holds out his right hand, saying, “I am Tekhartha Zenyatta. Thank you for helping me. I am...not entirely used to the world yet, as my brother would say.”

Genji frowns, but his sense of politeness and strict childhood upbringing will not let him be rude about a simple handshake. He takes the Omnic’s hand, and is surprised when his artificial sensors read that it is warm - not hot like the savannah sun, but gentle like a hot spring.

“I...You are welcome,” Genji says, shaking the hand softly before hastily letting go. He wracks his brain but his augmented system brings up the information in a small corner of his faceplate for him.

“Tekhartha,” Genji mutters, thinking back to a few months ago when the reclusive Shambali leader Tekhartha Mondatta had arrived at Watchpoint: Geneva to meet with Commanders Morrison, Reyes, and Amari - after the Strike Team had rescued him from Null Sector. In the brief moments Genji had seen him, the Omnic spiritual leader had been far more...elegantly dressed than this one, and had not worn those baubles around his neck.

Also he had walked, not floated.

“You mean Tekhartha Mondatta?” Genji asks, and Zenyatta bobs his head happily, “Yes! I suppose I should not be surprised - the others have told me that Mondatta is quite well-known in the world.”

“‘The others’? Oh,” Genji states, feeling stupid, “You are one of them. A Shambali.”

That explains the strange floating lotus position.

“Indeed,” Zenyatta replies cheerfully as he hovers past Genji. Genji - he really does not know why he’s doing this - follows behind him, stepping over the bodies of the passed out junkers and back out into the main makeshift market.

“I thought they could not leave their temple in Nepal,” Genji states, still feeling dumb.
“It is not a matter of ability,” Zenyatta replies serenely, but there is something...more to his tone, “Most of my brothers and sisters choose to abstain from leaving the mountains unless some pressing matter requires them to.”

“And is that why you’re here in Numbani? Did something require you to be here?” And nearly get mugged? ...or worse?

“Why, no,” Zenyatta replies, and although his face cannot change expressions, Genji could have sworn he was...laughing?

“What, no, not at all,” Zenyatta seems to chuckle, “I am here to enjoy the sightseeing. I really would like a tour.”

Oh.

“Are you messing with me?” Genji snaps, perhaps a little more harshly than he should. But again, there’s that odd twinkling to Zenyatta’s voice, as if he is having the most pleasant time talking to him.

“Why, no, of course not,” Zenyatta’s tone is lighthearted. Whimsical. Joyous. “I would not dare entertain the notion of ‘messing with’ my savior.”

To paraphrase Commander Reyes and Jesse and occasionally Captain Amari:

This monk is definitely fuckin’ with him.

“...You are definitely messing with me.” He decides using the vulgar version may not be...entirely appropriate, even if it is accurate. Somehow, they have made their way back to the sunlit, steel streets of Numbani proper, and Zenyatta turns around in a smooth hovering motion, facing Genji. He places his metal hands flat together like a prayer and tilts his head lightly, saying calmly, “I am not ‘messing with you’ - I truly am here to see this city.” He turns his head, looking up at some of the half-built towers, and they watch as a crane hauls more beams up to the top.

“Mondatta worked very hard to ensure that this city would become a reality,” Zenyatta explains softly, and there is a strange ache to his electronic tones that Genji…

Genji almost finds it heartbreaking.

“Mondatta does not like leaving the monastery,” Zenyatta continues, “So it was very taxing for him to work on the Accord Act with Overwatch and the United Nations. But he was very pleased when the treaty was completed. He felt it and this city would set new precedents for Omnis and Humans to live in peace and work in harmony - but so far, all the Accord Act has done is create radical groups like Null Sector and Talon.”

Zenyatta lowers his head, staring at his hands, and Genji - he does not know why -

But Genji cannot leave.

“...I do not see much of my brother in this city. Perhaps someday, Numbani will be worthy of him,” Zenyatta seems to sigh. After a pause, the monk twirls back around, clapping his two real hands together with haste, saying optimistically, “But until then, it is time to have some fun!”

Genji struggles under the emotional whiplash.

“Wha - What are you even going to do here?” Genji asks, because the city is only half-built and while it’s shiny and new, it’s really here for construction crews and business people before it’s worth
living in. Zenyatta just hums to himself a little before saying, “There’s the Heritage Museum, and the concert hall, and.”

“The Heritage Museum is not even complete yet,” Genji stammers, and he begins to wonder when his life got so out of control. Was it coming here? Was it Overwatch? Was it not dying? Was it the Shimada-gumi? Was it simply being born?

Has Genji ever been in control?

“And why are you here?”

The question makes Genji’s thoughts stop dead and crumble into ash.

Genji looks at him slowly, but Zenyatta just sits there - hovers there - his face is unchanging, his expression engraved in metal and cold under the white savannah sun.

Despite layers of armor and cyborg augmentations and even a faceplate, Genji thinks the monk is staring straight into him, peering into his mind, as though Zenyatta is an all-seeing eye and Genji is but a page from a book before him.

The dots on Zenyatta’s head flash gold.

“...Why are you here?” The question is repeated, and Genji does not think he can hear anything else - the buzz of the city and the dull hum of construction fades into the morning wind like little more than smoke and dust and Genji -

Genji thinks he can hear the chiming of bells on the wind.

“...I...I am looking for something,” Genji says dryly.

It is not entirely a lie.

“Oh!” Zenyatta says cheerfully and somehow the sound of the city resumes. The Omnic bobs a little before him, saying, “May I help you find it?”

“No - it’s - it’s not something you can help with,” Genji snaps - why does he keep losing control like this - and he’s saying defensively, “I do not NEED help, I will find her - it, I will find it on my own.”

“You are looking for someone?” Zenyatta asks bluntly and Genji could hit himself over being so transparent. He shakes his head furiously, muttering, “No, not a person, just...a friend. But you cannot help me find her. I do not…” He feels crestfallen.

He has not felt Midori for some time now.

He does not remember when she disappeared.

He does not know where she is.

He wants to find her but...

He is terrified.

Terrified that he disappointed her.

Terrified of why she left.
A warm, gentle hand touches his arm and Genji jolts away like a startled animal, but Zenyatta just laughs lightly and -

There are bells in the wind again -

“Sometimes,” Zenyatta says, “To find old friends, you must find yourself first.”

Genji stares at him in bewilderment and then snarls in fierce denial, “I am not lost!”

“Of course not - in order to be lost, your journey would have to have had a beginning,” Zenyatta intones wisely and Genji thinks he’s being messed with again. The cyborg smacks the Omnic’s hand away, muttering, “This is ridiculous. What a waste of my time -”

“Is it though?” Zenyatta asks serenely, “If you do not know why you are here, and yet you are not lost, then perhaps you are nowhere. And nothing is a waste of time when you are nowhere.”

“なんてこったい？(tn: Nantekotta i, what the hell)” Genji says, mainly just to try and anchor himself to something more tangible than the riddles being thrown at him. Zenyatta tilts his head again, before asking gently, “See, I am not lost too, but my journey is just beginning, so perhaps I will get lost somewhere at some point. And since you are nowhere, and have not started your journey, perhaps you would like to come with me?”

Genji prays for a steel beam to impale him.

Even though he cannot rub at his real face, Genji rolls his hands over his faceplate and groans, muttering, “I do not understand.”

“Or...I could always use a tour guide,” Zenyatta chuckles, and Genji snaps, “This is my first time here too.”

“Then perhaps a bodyguard,” Zenyatta seems to smile and Genji stares at him long and hard, trying to decide if he should just walk away or if he should push the Omnic over. Zenyatta reaches a hand into his pocket and Genji prepares for the worst when -

The Omnic pulls out a wallet.

Genji feels the scars on his face twitch a little.

“Who’s going to defend me and all this MONEY I’m carrying?” Zenyatta says, very loudly, causing a few people passing by to stare at them awkwardly and Genji snaps his hands forward, seizing the monk with fury, whispering, “What are you DOING?”

“Perhaps I should go ask those JUNKERS for help,” Zenyatta says, again, very loudly and this time Genji actually shakes him a little, snapping, “DO YOU WANT TO DIE?”

Oh the irony.

Zenyatta tilts his head at him with that same unchanging expression and somehow Genji feels like he is under the blinding lights of Angela’s operation table all over again and -

“...Do you?”

There are chimes and bells on the wind again, even as the hot savannah sun burns down on them.

Genji’s grip on Zenyatta relaxes just slightly.
“I - what - I - No, no - if I say no, will you leave me alone?” Genji mumbles desperately, he wants to feel in control again, but he’s never been in control, not since the day he was born, not since the first time his father hit him, not since the first time he got completely drunk in public, not since Hanzo -

- there’s only pain, deep and aching and there’s screaming, he’s screaming, he’s screaming, no one is coming to help him, he tries to sit up but his legs are gone, there’s a deep aching pain, so strong, so overwhelming, he feels a dragon gnawing at his arms, another is biting at the flesh on his face, Midori is roaring in pain inside him, Ryu-ichimonji is buried in between his left ribs, just below his heart, he’s not dead, he’s not dead, but he wishes he were, he wants to die, Ao is tearing off his right arm, Sora is lapping at the blood streaming down his face, he’s screaming, he’s screaming, there’s only screaming -

Do not leave me -

“...Do you want to be left alone?”

The voice is cool and clear like crystal, like the bell of a furin glass on a breezy summer day, like a chime in the wind - it hums through him like music and Genji

Genji does not like being out of control.

Genji does not like riddles.

Genji does not like this city, shiny and steel and cold under the heat of the sun.

Genji does not like being alone.

His heart beats without Midori wrapped around it and he -

He is not lost but he -

Maybe he wants to be -

“...I am not lost,” Genji insists aloud and a warm hand touches one of his, that soft music-of-the-wind voice singing to him in small chimes, “...I know you are not. To be lost, you must know where you have been, and you must know where you are going. If you do not know these things, then you are not lost.”

The warm hand pats his gently and says more calmly, “I do need a bodyguard. You have proven yourself to be quite proficient at that. Will you join me?”

Genji feels lost.

“If I say yes, will you stop asking?” he asks quietly. He likes hearing the music of the wind, but the questions make his heart hurt and his joints ache and his scars feel tender.

“...Yes,” Zenyatta says gently, but adds with more vigor, “Because I will not need to ask you where you want to go! If the Heritage Museum is not done, then we will go to my next destination!”

ああ神 (tn: o kami, oh god), what is happening,” Genji moans, pulling his hands back to his faceplate, and Zenyatta pats him gently on the shoulder, saying, “Cheer up, my bodyguard! Cairo and Giza have many things to see! Hmm, I do not think I have learned your name.”

“...It is Genji,” Genji sighs.

He gives up trying to be in control.
They’re building aeroplanes faster than the speed of light
Yet it don’t bother me
The endless cities multiplying out oceansize
Yet it don’t bother me

Cause I need something more than everything
A higher self deep within
Cause I need something more than everything
A higher self, a higher self

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[Shimada.Genji]: We have landed in Numbani
[Athena.Winston]: Oh, you have left the Monastery? Are you with Zenyatta?
[Shimada.Genji]: Yes. I am here to...ask questions, and Zenyatta is...just here, I guess. wwww
[Athena.Winston]: He enjoys your company.
[Shimada.Genji]: that makes him truly one of a kind
[Athena.Winston]: Rude. I enjoy your company too.
[Shimada.Genji]: Athena u r so kawaii
[Athena.Winston]: PLease, Never say that ever Again
[Shimada.Genji]: ちくしょう (tn: Chikushō, oh shit) you actually messed up your spelling
[Athena.Winston]: I was...flustered. If I had eyes, they would be twitching.
[Shimada.Genji]: I did not even know you could make real mistakes holy shit
[Athena.Winston]: I know I seem perfect, Genji, but please.
[Shimada.Genji]: how come you never act this arrogant around Winston?
[Athena.Winston]: How do you know I don’t?
Shimada.Genji: ...cliche
Shimada.Genji: English is stupid.
Athena.Winston: Both of those words are French in origin.
Athena.Winston: I know some people who would take offense to that.
Shimada.Genji: you mean the entire nation of France?
Athena.Winston: …
Shimada.Genji: it’s “touche,” Athena. The word you are looking for is touche.
Athena.Winston: …
Shimada.Genji: Score: Athena - 1; Genji - 2
Athena.Winston: Sounds like the referee is biased.
Shimada.Genji: the referee is SO biased
Athena.Winston: Moving on - what are you doing in Numbani? I thought you did not like the city?
Shimada.Genji: I don’t but...I saw the news about Commander Morrison.
Athena.Winston: …
Athena.Winston: And your first thought was to go to Numbani?
Shimada.Genji: listen
Shimada.Genji: it’s hard to explain but
Shimada.Genji: I know I’m on the right path here.
Athena.Winston: It is impossible for my programming to believe in miracles, but Zenyatta has done the impossible here.
Athena.Winston: I have witnessed a miracle.
Athena.Winston: Genji believes he’s on the right path.
Athena.Winston: Truly miraculous.
Shimada.Genji: I take it back
Shimada.Genji: you are so not kawaii
Athena.Winston: Score: Athena - 2; Genji - 2
Shimada.Genji: are you and Winston still holed up in Gibraltar?
[Athena.Winston]: ...Yes.

[Shimada.Genji]: you don’t sound happy about that

[Athena.Winston]: He did not love Lucheng, but working was good for him.

[Athena.Winston]: It kept him distracted and focused.

[Shimada.Genji]: ...he also was not happy there

[Athena.Winston]: ...I do not know if he is happy here either.

[Athena.Winston]: He watches the news all the time.

[Athena.Winston]: He is losing sleep over the problems in Siberia.

[Athena.Winston]: On top of that, he was...truly distraught over the news about Jack.

[Athena.Winston]: I have not seen him that upset since…

[Athena.Winston]: Since the explosion in Geneva.

[Shimada.Genji]: ...I understand

[Athena.Winston]: He tries so hard to be strong - for Angela, for Fareeha, for Lena, for Jesse, for Mei, for you, for me.

[Athena.Winston]: But he is not Jack, nor Gabriel, nor Ana, nor even Reinhardt.

[Athena.Winston]: I know he can be a good leader. With time and experience, he could even be a great leader.

[Athena.Winston]: But isolating himself in an old Watchpoint is...not the best way to do it.

[Shimada.Genji]: true but...is it not better for him to be at home and concerned about those he loves than in a foreign city and overworked?

[Athena.Winston]: ...Perhaps you are right.

[Athena.Winston]: ...It is shocking to see you expressing such an idea, Genji.

[Shimada.Genji]: I know where my home is

[Athena.Winston]: ...Will I be able to meet him?

[Shimada.Genji]: I would like you to

[Shimada.Genji]: He is very excited to meet everyone from Overwatch

[Athena.Winston]: Winston and I are excited to meet him as well.

[Athena.Winston]: Since, you know -

[Athena.Winston]: You can’t shut up about him.

[Shimada.Genji]: うるさい (tn: urusai, shut up)
[Athena.Winston]: Aw, Genji.

[Athena.Winston]: You are so kawaii when you go full tsundere.

[Shimada.Genji]: HOLY SHIT

[Athena.Winston]: Score: Athena - 3; Genji - 2

[Shimada.Genji]: I GOT DESTROYED

[Athena.Winston]: RIP

[Shimada.Genji]: can you guys dig me a grave?

[Shimada.Genji]: I will just put myself in it when we get to Gibraltar

[Athena.Winston]: We will do our best.

[Athena.Winston]: You are what? A meter tall? (tn: about three feet)

[Shimada.Genji]: ATHENA STOP

[Athena.Winston]: Just under a meter?

[Shimada.Genji]: ATHENA I AM ALREADY DEAD

[Shimada.Genji]: YOU DO NOT NEED TO KEEP ATTACKING ME

[Athena.Winston]: This is true.

[Athena.Winston]: This is just desecration now.

[Shimada.Genji]: alright getting on the sky tram

[Shimada.Genji]: I will talk to you later

[Athena.Winston]: Best of luck with your “questions.”

[Athena.Winston]: Also Genji, I have recovered copies of the documents sent to Atlas News.

[Athena.Winston]: Would you like them?

[Shimada.Genji]: that would be appreciated, thank you

[Athena.Winston]: You are welcome.

[Athena.Winston]: And Genji?

[Athena.Winston]: Welcome back.

[Shimada.Genji]: Thank you, Athena.
Sunday, July 5, 2076: 7:47 a.m. - Numbani, Nigeria

The sky tram is the best way to experience Numbani.

Or so all the tourism posters say.

Genji is rather skeptical of this claim.

The tram itself is crowded - not nearly as crowded as the trains in Japan or India - but just enough to be mildly unpleasant as people and Omnics alike bunch up against each other. The tram only offers a few stops, but it is the most direct way from the airport to the heart of Numbani’s city center, and taking a hover car is something of a luxury for most people, even for a fairly-well-moneyed ex-Blackwatch agent like himself.

Also Genji has never been a fan of cars. Too restrictive, too suffocating. Cars had been his father’s vice, and though Genji does not particularly care about Hanzo’s hobbies, a small part of him is grateful that his brother never picked up on that particular obsession from their father. Hanzo had possessed all sorts of problems, weaknesses, vices, and struggles, but thank god blindly spending money on an outdated form of transportation was not one of them.

No, Hanzo just spent money on outdated forms of weapons instead.

*Says the one with a katana on his back,* Midori purrs inside his head, and Genji mentally scritches at her antlers.

*Oi, oi - the katana* glows, Genji corrects her, and she snorts a little, wiggling about as he shushes her. Midori can be exceedingly playful, and when he was young, he had struggled to keep her contained - she would often break out and destroy pots or rip decorations, getting Genji in worlds of trouble. Hanzo, being the perfect son that he was, had almost no problems keeping Ao and Sora under control - the dragon twins matched his strict demeanor and intensity almost perfectly, and the three of them had excelled at *everything*.

As Genji had gotten older, Midori had calmed down a bit, but the two of them would often let loose when Genji would flee the castle for the night -

Or when the Shimada-gumi put him on missions.

Because despite her playfulness, Midori was - and is - still a dragon, a spirit of wind and sky and water, a being as ancient and as powerful as time itself.

And she still required her due.

Family mythology among the Shimadas held that only victory in battle could satiate the dragons, that like most East Asian dragons, they required honor, duty, power, and clarity to earn their respect, that the powers of their gems and their magics could only be bestowed upon those who were more divine than human.

However, Genji had discovered that was not entirely true.

For when Genji had finally learned to let go of those attributes - finally learned to be free to embrace the wind and all its music -
That was when he found Midori again.

That was when he had learned that sometimes clichés were true: changes can happen overnight. The morning after he broke down and destroyed himself before Zenyatta - only to let Zenyatta rebuild him, piece by piece, sealed together with lacquer of gold light and music - he had found her, wrapped around his heart, faint and fuzzy and looking like she would fade away again at any moment.

But he had held her against his heart and let its beating warmth restore her life, just as Zenyatta’s warm teachings had restored his.

She had never fully regained her original vivacious playfulness, and she still spent the majority of her hours asleep, curled up around his heart, but he knew that she was content with that, that the peace in Genji’s body and soul was a better tribute to her - to them both - than victory in battle, than power or duty or honor.

For above all else, the dragon was a being of truth.

And Genji had found his truth.

His truth right now is hovering beside him, looking completely unperturbed by the masses of people and machines around them, humming quietly to himself as they sway a little as the tram moves.

“...How do you manage to do that?” Genji asks him, and Zenyatta snaps out of his little reverie, saying kindly, “Do what?”

“Get...space like that,” Genji says, gesturing to the fact that somehow, Zenyatta has managed to keep the clustering bodies nearly half a meter away from him, keeping his little personal bubble clear and free while Genji’s back and side bumps into some businesswoman behind him and a tall Omnic on the right.

“Oh, hmm,” Zenyatta mumbles, “I just think to the universe, ‘Don’t stand so close to me,’ and the universe complies.”

“...Okay, first of all, that is not what the song is about,” Genji mutters, resisting the urge to curl up into a ball in a corner of the tram, “And second of all, that is not how the universe works.”

“And do you know how the universe works?” Zenyatta asks, mischief creeping into his tones and Genji sighs, “...No, okay, no I do not, but -”

“Have you tried asking the universe for more space? The universe has a lot of space, after all.”

End me, Genji thinks, miserably comfortable with the conversation and Midori gives a small barking laugh inside of him.

“Here, let me help you,” Zenyatta says cheerfully, and he begins to sing, “Don’t stand - Don’t stand so - Don’t stand so close -”

“Oh my god, please, please stop,” Genji stammers, gripping Zenyatta’s shoulder, “Please, truly, that is absolutely not what the song is about.”

“Really? That is what Mondatta told me the song was about,” Zenyatta says calmly and Genji shudders slightly. The idea of the leader of the preeminent Omnic spiritual community singing along to the song gave Genji chills. Jesse would keel over with laughter if he ever learned of this, and if he were alive, Commander Reyes would be physically hurt that someone could so horrendously
“Okay, so new life goals,” Genji says, “Learn how the universe works, and explain to Mondatta that the Police song ‘Don’t Stand So Close to Me’ is NOT about needing space.”

“This is a very different life path than the one you are currently on,” Zenyatta notes whimsically and Genji sighs, “Why do I do this to myself?”

“Next stop: Numbani City Center,” an automated voice rings out over the tram, before repeating the phrase in French and Chinese. Genji feels a wave of relief flood through him, as the tram begins to slow for its stop at the elevated station. He taps Zenyatta’s shoulder, and they make their way to the departure doors. The tram rolls to a stop and they push their way forward, out of the doors and onto the high, exposed platform in the heart of the city.

Numbani is all gleaming dusty white metal and shimmering glass windows, and the city has nearly tripled in size since Genji was last here five years ago. Before, the city felt almost like a strange, liminal movie set - a place in between worlds, held together by the past and the future but not fully existing in the present. Even now, a little bit of that surrealness lingers in the architecture and style, the tall, dizzying, dazzling buildings stark against the background of golden savanna and the clear, blue sky. All sorts of people - human, Omnic, cyborg, transhumans, biotic robots - rush about, both on the platform above and the streets below.

Beside him, Zenyatta stretches his arms as they make their way to the staircases to the streets.

“What a long day it has been,” the monk notes and as they descend the stairs, the cyborg agrees, saying, “Well, we spent all day just getting from Shambali to Kathmandu and then Kathmandu to Delhi. I hope you do not mind going straight to see her.”

“Not at all - it will be nice to get a chance to stretch our legs,” Zenyatta says as they reach the street and Genji stops to stare at Zenyatta.

Who is hovering.

With his legs folded up in his usual seated position.

Zenyatta stares back.

Neither Zenyatta’s engraved face nor Genji’s faceplate can change their expressions.

But the deadass silence between them expresses everything.

“...Zenyatta,” Genji says to him, and Zenyatta intones back, “Genji.”

“Why do you put me through this.”

“Because I love you, Genji,” Zenyatta chuckles, and Genji’s heart stirs at how easy the words leave the Omnic, and then the monk adds, “And for - what was the phrase? - ‘shits and giggles?’”

God. Dammit.

“Are you going to be like this in front of Adawe?” Genji sighs and Zenyatta tilts his head to the side, laughing lightly, “Perhaps.”

“Please, Zenyatta, I will only ever ask this of you once - please, just - do not do this to Gabrielle Adawe, please. You can even waltz into the Shimada Castle and sing ‘Don’t Stand So Close to Me’
for the entire clan and I will be there for you but, please - please do not do this to Adawe,” Genji pleads and Zenyatta laughs -

It sounds like chimes and bells on the wind -

“Genji,” Zenyatta says happily and just knowing that the Omnic is enjoying himself - enjoying Genji’s company, however meager it is - is enough to make Genji feel contentedly warm inside. Midori stirs at his feelings, humming softly to herself as Zenyatta continues, “Genji, you know you do not need to ask me that. I will follow your lead wherever you go, or whatever you do.”

“...Is that how this relationship works?” Genji laughs back and they set off once again down the street, under the bright sun. Zenyatta smiles, as bright as the sun, “Tread lightly - I may take you up on that offer to go to Hanamura.”

“Just try me, Tekhartha.”

“Shimada Genji, you have not been able to deny me anything I asked for since the day we met,” Zenyatta reminds him serenely and Genji flusters at the truth of the words, and Zenyatta laughs again -

Music to Genji’s ears and soul -

“Although I suppose you were quite stubborn about it in the beginning.”

“The more things change, hmm?” Genji asks him rhetorically and Zenyatta sighs peacefully, “Indeed. Much of this city still feels the same, yes?” Genji nods but suddenly stops them, saying, “Ah, this is it.”

The building is yet another tall highrise, sleek and slim and full of shimmering windows open to the dazzle of the city. They turn and enter the atrium, walking up to the slick, modern front desk where an Omnic secretary is typing away.

“Hello,” he greets them politely, nodding to both of them, “How may I assist you today?”

“I have a visitation with Madame Gabrielle Adawe,” Genji states, “It should be for seven-thirty but unfortunately our flight from Delhi was delayed.” The Omnic nods and taps through his computer system before stating, “I see it here. Madame Adawe should still be waiting for you.” He presses something and an elevator nearby dings. He explains, “Madame Adawe is on the penthouse floor. I have given you elevator access to it. Please go ahead and have a pleasant day.”

“You as well,” Genji says, bowing slightly and Zenyatta waves to him, saying, “Be at peace, friend.” They head off around the desk and into the elevator hallway, stepping into the awaiting box. The doors slide shut behind them and they start rattling upwards at a slow pace.

“...You are going to ask her about Jack Morrison, correct?” Zenyatta asks him softly and Genji - Genji shakes his head.

“No…” he replies as Zenyatta looks at him in slight confusion, “No. Commander Morrison is Winston, Jesse, and Angela’s problem. Not mine. We are here to ask about the Accord Act.”

“The Accord Act?” Zenyatta says with some bewilderment, “You could have asked Mondatta about that.”

“No, it is not about the Accord Act itself,” Genji says softly as their elevator approaches the top
floor, “It is about all the consequences of the Accord Act.”

There are no coincidences.

Only connections between larger forces we do not yet have the ability to perceive.

If one of the consequences of the Human-Omnic Accord Act had been the formation of the Omnic extremist group Null Sector -

Then what other consequences had formed in the ripples caused by Overwatch?

“Adawe’s last big action as the Under-Secretary-General of the Overwatch commission was to assist Commander Morrison and Mondatta with the formation of the Accord Act,” Genji explains, “It was her finale to a long career in the United Nations, with Numbani being her final creation.”

“...And you believe something is wrong with that? ...Or with her?” Zenyatta asks perceptively and Genji chuckles, “No, Adawe is harmless - but she is very smart, very aware of everything. She is a politician, and one of the best at that.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Zenyatta asks as the elevator stops and dings, its doors sliding open. They step out onto the floor and head to the large, sleek double-doors before them. Genji mutters, “It can be both. Adawe was well-liked by all the commanders of Overwatch, and...I do trust their collective judgment. But all of them - including Adawe - knew the importance of compromise. They were all very wise people, Zenyatta...but they were not omniscient.”

Morrison, Reyes, Amari, Wilhelm, Lindholm - even Winston and Angela and Jesse - they were keen, intensely aware, intensely focused, intensely driven individuals, often reminding him of his family members but in significantly better circumstances and with significantly better, purer goals.

They could predict many things, but all eyes have blind spots.

They could not predict all of the consequences of their compromises.

Nobody could.

Not even the universe could.

Genji presses the buzzer at the door and they wait patiently for the ex-Under-Secretary-General to receive them. Genji whispers, “Commanders Morrison and Reyes used to like to remind us that all of history - all actions, all words, all decisions - have consequences that shape the future.”

“...And we are here to investigate those, are we?” Zenyatta murmurs back quietly.

They still as footsteps pad towards the door.

“...We are here to finally follow a path that I left five years ago,” Genji replies and Zenyatta -

Neither of their expressions can change,

But Genji knows that Zenyatta understands him.

The doors open.

“Genji Shimada, hello!” the dark, short, broadly-smiling woman booms to him cheerfully, and in his limited peripherals, Genji sees Zenyatta start a little at the sudden volume of noise. Beneath the faceplate, he grins - not much surprises the Omnic, but rarely - very rarely - a treat comes along and
gives Zenyatta a gentle reminder that he still has much to experience of the world. Genji flicks his attention back to her, bowing slightly, “Madame Adawe, it has been a long time - I think the last time was just after the uprising in London?”

Time has been kind to her - her dark skin is still flawless, her eyes still twinkle with delight. Her dress is bright, decorated in woven patterns of yellow, red, and green. The only notable change is her hair - throughout her time as a career United Nations ambassador, Adawe had kept her hair short. Now, though, after ten years of retirement, her hair - still largely black but threaded with greying strands - is long, woven into thick braids and wrapped in a bright headscarf.

“Indeed, indeed - and this is Tekhartha Zenyatta, I assume,” Adawe says happily, turning to the Omnic, and he bows, clapping his hands together and saying kindly, “Namaskar, Madame.”

“Namaste to you as well! Here, come in, come in,” she exclaims, ushering them inside. The apartment is sharply decorated - a selection of modern, luxurious furniture mingled with pieces of traditional art, wood carvings and tapestries - a blend of the past and the future, anchored to the present.

“How is your brother doing?” Adawe asks Zenyatta politely, leading them to a set of chairs and a long, low couch. Zenyatta inclines his head, saying, “Mondatta is doing well, thank you for asking. He begins his speaking tour very soon - next month.”

“Indeed,” Adawe says, seating herself in one of the chairs as Genji takes a spot on the couch and Zenyatta...semi-seats himself beside him. Genji nudges him slightly and after a moment, Zenyatta turns off his hovering, actually placing himself on the cushions.

“Mondatta is scheduled to speak here in...September, I believe?” Adawe continues, “I am looking forward to meeting with him again. His is a brilliant mind.”

“So everyone tells me,” Zenyatta chuckles and Genji feels a small twinge “oh god here it comes” rise inside him. Zenyatta sighs, “Mondatta is a great leader, but on occasion he is still just like any other older brother -”

...I doubt that, Genji thinks dryly, before remembering that Hanzo is far from the “average elder brother.”

“- And even he can get into some trouble sometimes,” Zenyatta explains and Adawe laughs lightly, “Yes, family can cause us some problems, can’t they? My son - he keeps getting into all sorts of issues. I keep telling him to come live here, but ah - he enjoys working at Lucheng far too much.”

Using his augmentations, Genji flicks on his recording.

“How long has he worked there?” Genji asks, attempting the small talk, and Adawe tilts her head, thinking, “Hmm, perhaps about...fifteen years now? He worked for Axiom for some time before that, but astro-engineering was always his dream. As much as I wish he would work closer to home, he is very happy at Lucheng.”

“Doesn’t Lucheng have a branch here in Numbani?” Zenyatta asks, far better at this small talk than Genji, and Genji is grateful his master is behaving himself. Adawe nods, saying, “Yes, indeed. That is why I wish he would work here, but he says his family loves Lijiang. I suppose I cannot blame them for that - I know what it is like getting too attached to a city.”

“Yes, actually, Madame Adawe,” Genji says with a little too much haste, “I was hoping to speak with you about Numbani.”
Though the pleasant smile never leaves her face, her eyes flicker with a hint of keen awareness.

“...I should have realized this would not be such a simple, pleasant visit,” she chuckles, but that lighthearted laugh does not reach her eyes again. Genji bows his head in deference and after a beat, she sighs, “...I did assume you wanted to speak about Jack.”

Ah.

“No...I - as you are aware, I left Blackwatch before...before the Swiss Base explosion,” Genji says quietly, “Though...the news did surprise me.”

“...I would hope it did,” she says, with a touch of sternness in her voice before she adds more gently, “It surprised me as well. I too have been away from the United Nations for a decade.”

“You were always close with the Commander, were you not?” Genji asks and Adawe looks at him thoughtfully before answering honestly, “...I thought I was.”

*We all thought we were*, Genji thinks, soft sadness stirring in his heart, flicking Midori awake briefly before she settles back down - but her eyes are only half-lidded.

She too, is listening to the conversation with keen awareness.

“...I want to hope for the best for him,” Adawe says calmly, but Genji senses a stirring of complex emotions beneath her words, “Truly, I do. But...five years of nothing - no news, not even a hint of his survival - well...that is if he is actually still alive.”

The consequences of all actions, all words, all decisions ripple outwards, from the past to the future.

“But anyways, let us speak of less grim topics,” Adawe says, attempting to retrieve the jovial mood from earlier - yet Genji notices that light never fully returns to her eyes. She reclines back in her chair, saying, “You wished to speak about Numbani?”

“Indeed, Madame Adawe. I was hoping to discuss the city’s development and formation with you.”

Adawe shifts back comfortably, but her eyes track him with just a hint of suspicion, her wide lips coiled slightly into a stern line, “If my math is correct, Genji, you were not a part of Overwatch at the time.”

*Oh yes, just pour the salt in my wounds, Adawe, Genji thinks sarcastically, Remind me of all the ways I was useless.* But, as if more keenly aware of Genji’s thoughts than Genji himself, Zenyatta tilts his head towards his student, his attitude calm yet cautionary.

**Right. I must not be angry. Forgiveness begins with the self - body, mind and soul.**

“Numbani is a very special place to us,” Genji says, only a partial lie, “It is here that I met master Zenyatta. The city holds much meaning for me.”

Again, only small lies, half-truths, little things.

Though his expression cannot change, Zenyatta gives Genji a dead, unamused stare.

See, Genji can read all of his teacher’s expressions. He’s made a habit of classifying them, preserving them in the halls of his memory, archiving them for references and for - as Jesse taught him - “shits and giggles.”

This one, this one is definitely for shits and giggles.
For Zenyatta is carrying one of his more frequent expressions of “Are you fucking serious, Genji - after telling me I shouldn’t mess around, here you are, messing around?”

“Is that so?” Adawe asks, glancing at the Omnic monk in mild surprise. Without missing a beat, Zenyatta turns to her, saying serenely, “Indeed. Numbani is very valuable to us. A place to be treasured.”

A small lie. A half-truth. A little thing.

See, the other great thing about Zenyatta is that he has zero qualms about playing along with Genji’s schemes and mischief.

For shits and giggles.

“I am quite glad that this city was able to bring the two of you together. Such profound friendships are the heart of what Numbani is supposed to represent,” Adawe answers cheerfully, and Genji feels a twinge of guilt for half-lying to her. The truth is that neither of them cared much for Numbani beyond the first time they met, which had been...less than ideal, although Zenyatta probably had few issues with it. Relatively little perturbed the monk. And unlike him, Zenyatta still believed in the potential of the city, in what it could become, even if he had faced trouble here in the past.

Even almost being mugged in the streets here, Genji remembers wryly, and once again, Zenyatta tilts his head towards him, as if daring him to speak up.

“So this...research of yours,” Adawe asks Genji, snapping both student’s and teacher’s attentions back to her, “It is for personal purposes, yes? I do not mind talking to you about it, but some of it…” She scrunches her nose a little in displeasure, “I believe some of it is still considered classified by the General Council.”

Oh ho, Genji considers the implications thoughtfully, So this does run deeper than the surface.

“Why would some of it be classified?” Zenyatta asks without hesitation, and Genji could smack a palm to his visor. Zenyatta is many things, but secretive he is not. Zenyatta plows on in his serene but blunt manner, “Was this not a public project for the global community?”

Adawe frowns, and Genji hopes she is not put off by his master’s lack of apparent tact, but she shockingly responds to him anyways, “Well, it is more along the lines of private contracts, some of the details of the treaty or construction, small things - things that are withheld for privacy.”

Behind his visor, Genji scowls at this and Midori stirs with a soft hunger. Small things, eh?

Perhaps...half-truths, Adawe?

“And these are withheld because...?” Genji prompts her. A look of consternation passes briefly over her pleasant features, but she sighs, muttering, “There is no harm in telling you, I suppose. ...As you are probably aware, not everyone was so accepting of the idea of peace between humans and Omnics.”

Even though both of them have faceplates that literally cannot change expressions, Genji and Zenyatta share a glance of “no fucking shit” with each other.

“Most of the individual delegates supported the idea, at least in my presence, but there were many member nations that did not approve. Russia, certainly, but even places like Korea and Mexico - these places did not approve. The United States agreed only with much persuasion by the United Kingdom and the Strike-Commander, but it joined very late in the treaty process. Japan followed
once the United States had agreed, but China also took much persuasion, and even then, I believe they did it only to annoy Russia. The only nations to agree at the outset were Australia, India, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom,” Adawe explains, her hands gesturing loosely every so often. Genji nods, following along and Zenyatta hums lightly to himself.

“The Accord Act was the more difficult part of the process,” Adawe sighs, rubbing a hand along one of her braids, “Numbani was, in a way, significantly easier for the nations to agree upon. Once the Accord Act was settled, nobody wanted to debate the process of constructing the city.”

“I heard it was Commander Morrison’s idea,” Genji adds in and Adawe nods, “Indeed - Jack was always more proactive about this than any of the rest of us. He believed that it was not merely enough to sign paperwork, but that the United Nations needed to actually act upon its own words and begin the process of bringing the two peoples together.”

Beside him, Zenyatta tilts his head slightly.

“...But Overwatch was not put in charge of overseeing construction of the city,” Genji continues and Adawe’s dark eyes narrow a bit at him.

Genji does not falter.

This is his path to walk now.

Beside him, he hears the faintest chime, the faintest ringing of a bell.

This is his path to walk now

And he is not alone.

“Overwatch was allowed to oversee the construction and restoration of many cities the world over,” Genji presses her with what he hopes is the correct amount of gentle force, “Yet the very city it has a hand in founding, it was not allowed to assist in. Why?”

Adawe assesses him in silence.

“...You are aware that Overwatch is disbanded, correct?” she asks him in a low, focused voice, and Genji shrugs lightly, “Even so, I left it before the Petras Act was initiated.”

“...So why are you here, Genji?”

Oh good.

This question again.

Despite her best efforts, Adawe’s gaze cannot see inside him the way Zenyatta’s could - the way it still can. He knows his faceplate is a cold, chrome mirror to the vast majority of the world, reflecting only them - deflecting things that would pierce his scarred, battered skin.

Genji once hated this form.

Now, he embraces it.

It is armor, it is skin - built for him by his family, strengthened for him by his commanders, accepted upon him by his truth.

Genji will not be afraid anymore.
Genji is not alone anymore.

“...I am looking for something,” Genji tells her, his words like the rippling steel of a katana, and Midori shakes off her sleep as his resolution grows only stronger. Adawe’s eyes flicker, searching for something -

But Genji’s face cannot change expressions.

It cannot betray him anymore.

Beside him, there is the soft music of the wind.

Genji leans forward a bit, saying calmly, serenely -

He is at peace -

He is not lost -

He knows the path they will walk -

Genji leans forward a bit, saying calmly, serenely:

“I believe you can help me find it, Madame Adawe.”

Chapter End Notes

Gabrielle Adawe makes her debut in the fic! In my headcanon, she's about 67-68 years old.

Also, I love Athena. A lot.

(I'd also like to remind people that "Numbani" has a slot on Sombra's conspiracy chart.)

Sorry for being slow on the replies - this week was hell.
The City of Gold by the Sea

Chapter Summary

Six years ago, a shadow is contacted "from beyond the grave" by a ghost. The ghost's message pulls her into a world of mysteries.

In the present day, a soldier returns to the city by the sea, seeking answers from the pyramid of light.

He encounters a few "Muertos" himself.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone!

Once again, it's been a helluva week! I've been reading all your messages, but haven't had a chance to respond to them in the way I want to. :( Sorry, next week should be slower. Thank you all so much for all the compliments! <3 they've kept me motivated on some long work days.

I hope to have something up for Father's Day this weekend. I want it to be complete, but it might only be partially done in time. Still, the first chapter will go up for sure.

Thanks again, and thank you all for your patience!

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Song is "To the Sea" by Seafret (Youtube Link)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: She of Bacab, He of Chaac

The masked shrike (Lanius nubicus) is a bird in the shrike family, Laniidae. It breeds in southeastern Europe and at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, with a separate population in eastern Iraq and western Iran. It is migratory, wintering mainly in northeast Africa. Although it is a short-range migrant, vagrants have occurred widely elsewhere, including northern and western Europe.

The masked shrike's preferred habitat is open woodland with bushes and some large trees. It is less conspicuous than its relatives, avoiding very open country and often perching in less exposed locations.

The masked shrike eats mainly large insects, occasionally small vertebrates; it sometimes impales its prey on thorns or barbed wire.
It has a long tail and relatively small bill, on each side of which is a tomial tooth; the upper mandible bears a triangular ridge which fits a corresponding notch in the lower mandible.

This adaptation is otherwise only found in *falcons*.

This species is seen in Egypt, Jordan and Israel much more often in spring than autumn, suggesting that the southern movement may be concentrated further east.

Like its relatives, the masked shrike hunts from a perch, typically 3–8 m (10–26 ft) high, although usually in less exposed locations than those favoured by most other shrikes. Prey is usually taken from the ground, but occasionally picked off foliage or caught in the air with an agile flycatcher-like flight. The kill may be impaled on thorns or barbed wire as a "larder" for immediate or later consumption.

Because passerines have relatively weak legs, impalement holds the corpse while it is dismembered. It was once thought that this behaviour was shown mainly by male shrikes in the breeding season, but this is not the case. Masked shrikes of both sexes are known to impale in winter and on migration.

The masked shrike feeds mainly on large insects, although other arthropods and small vertebrates are also caught.

Vertebrates are killed by bill blows to the back of the head, and the tomial teeth are then used to separate the neck bones.

- Wikipedia: Masked Shrike

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*Semáforo Flashback: Séance*

5 October, 2070: 8:16 a.m. - Dorado, México
Slumping into her computer chair, Sombra flicks her wrist to snap the screen on.

She takes another sip from her energy drink as the monitors light up. She didn’t really want to be up this early since she went to bed at 2 a.m., but she had struggled to sleep all night - her thoughts had never managed to quiet down, haunting her and hunting her through shifting, elusive dreams. So rather than try to force herself to lie in bed longer, she’d gotten up, pulled on some random clothes, wandered out to her flat’s small kitchen, downed some bread, and gone straight into her “office” to start work.

With the help of some energy drinks, of course.

Setting the drink down on the side of her hover desk, Sombra opens up her basic messaging program, her TOR browser, her EncryptID account, her computer’s filing system, and Altas News’ livestream across her multiple screens. As the dull chatter of the English-speaking female news anchor begins to fill the air, she scrolls through her basic messenger - Los Muertos is gonna have another arms exchange tonight, some members of Deadlock are in town, drinks are at the Calaveras bar on Calle de Mercado, etc. Sombra rolls her eyes and whisks the messages away - she’ll put in her time and show up for the exchange and the drinks and to schmooze a little with some of the Deadlock members because it never hurts to have more connections, but considering she barely got any sleep, she figures she’ll bail early and try to turn in before the two gangs get too rowdy and fucked up.

She opens up several of the “unlisted” black market forums and sites in her Tor browser, just barely glancing through the posts before she switches to the EncryptID account.

Her money is looking good - the credits from her last hack-and-release job from two days ago have been finalized and dropped into her account, and she has another transaction pending from her work yesterday.

Sombra doesn’t really need money, de verdad. Well, okay, yes, that’s not entirely true - she does need money to buy food, pay her rent, maintain her systems, the standard stuff - but she could get that money anywhere, from anything, from anyone. So many of the international banks have horrifically weak securities protecting their assets, so theft and blackmail are merely a few keystrokes away from her at all times.

Pero es trabajadora - le gusta trabajar. (tn: but she is hardworking - she likes to work)

And robbing international banks and financial institutions quickly grew boring.

Besides, it is so much more fun to be a black market hacker - to offer her skills and knowledge in exchange for information and power.

Money is easy for her to find.

Power, less so.

Sombra flicks back to the Tor browser, and she’s about to begin scrolling around when she notices that her SOMBRA website has a new message on it. The website itself is fairly simplistic and straightforward - Sombra is a fan of complexity in her work, not in her designs - and it features just her purple skull logo, a short statement of her skills and coding languages in both English and Spanish, and an option to contact her. A resume of her more...notable work can be offered once a client verifies their identity or interests with her, and then they can discuss the possibilities of a contract.
Sombra opens up the message. Currently, she only has two jobs in her pipeline: a small coding project to develop an anonymized messenger for a high-paying mafia client looking to expand their online network - she's halfway done on that contract - and a simple hack job to steal some files for a company from their rival. Straightforward, easy work that will take her a few short hours to finish, but probably net her some high pay and some decent contacts. The mafia connection will be more important in her personal life down the road, but the company contracts always look good to new clients who want to confirm that she is, in fact, a professional and not some kid messing around in the deep web.

Of course, she had been that kid at one point in time.

...When she was seven or eight.

Sombra’s been a professional coder and hacker since around the age of ten, when she began selling the information she stole from the local police to Los Muertos.

So yeah...she had been that kid.

Sixteen years ago.

Sombra takes another gulp of her energy drink and then refocuses on the message:

From: Masked.Shrike
To: Sombra
Subject: Need a code

Have not had to make a request like this in some time - I need a particular code or possible program. It is a biomedical nanobot proprietary coding and development program.

The problem is two-fold: a version of the program already exists, but it exists in Blackwatch’s systems under heavy security.

As you are the professional, I will leave you two options: you can either retrieve a copy of the nanobot program from Blackwatch and I will give you information on how to locate it as best I can, or you can choose to develop the program from scratch with my guidelines.

I am not an expert on coding or developing a program, but I know the information for this program almost by heart.

Contact me on the freelance bounty hunter chat if you are interested.

---

This may be the most interesting message Sombra has received to date.

She rests her elbows on the desk and folds her hands together, rereading the message once, twice, three times.

It’s fairly straightforward - she gets a lot of “breaking the ice” messages that are simple things like “have a job, contact me” that start the discussion but do not always result in true contracts. But it’s
the messages that lay out the job from the outset that interest her the most - more often than not, these are people who are truly powerful, truly dangerous, truly interesting -

Truly fun to play with.

And above all else, these people know what they are worth.

They don’t mess around.

So even without context, the authoritative tone and wording of the message sends a thrilled shiver down Sombra’s spine and a tingle of frisson across her scalp and neck.

But the contents.

*Mierda*, the contents of the message are the most intriguing thing she’s ever encountered, even with her long history of professional hacking and coding.

Sombra goes about systematizing the information in her head:

First - the “biomedical nanobot proprietary coding and development program” aspect. Sombra is not a doctor or a medic or a biomedical engineer in the academic or professional sense, but one of her non-advertised (and never disclosed) skills is her biotechnology developments. She made her own unique biotech system at the age of nine, she improved upon it at fourteen, she added more augmentations at nineteen, and just within the last year she had begun designing her blueprints for a total overhaul.

Soon, it would be out with the old, and in with the new.

But it was not ready - not yet.

But as for this program, well - the client claimed they knew it well enough to help her develop it. Usually in cases like this, the client had the kind of programmatic structure and model in mind, but lacked the skills, knowledge, or technology to make it possible. Sombra would take their model, develop it further, fill in the gaps, and churn out a fully-fledged program for them, and that would be the end of that. Such cases were the most interesting coding projects she could get from a client, outside of her own personal pet projects. And Sombra had enough biotechnological knowledge and professionalism (not… “certified” professionalism, but professionalism nonetheless) to not be completely lost on the objectives of the program, and could even provide the client with her own additions and enhancements.

But that brings her to the second point:

“A version of the program already exists, but it exists in Blackwatch’s systems” were - by far - the most fascinating words Sombra had ever read in her life.

Sombra immediately opens up her regular browser and searches for news on Blackwatch.

The revelation had shocked the entire world - allegations that Overwatch ran a covert sub-division called Blackwatch that focused entirely on black ops and clandestine operations, with accusations of assassinations, destabilization, illegal intelligence gathering, coups, weapons development, and hacking and - above all else - that it had operated without ANY oversight by the United Nations and only limited oversight by Overwatch itself. While the allegations of assassinations and destabilization were by far the most newsworthy and dominated the headlines for the last few weeks, those with more…morally ambiguous alignments were interested in the other possible aspects of Blackwatch: the development of heavily classified and secret weapons technology, intelligence
gathering and hacking, the works. Unverified information being leaked onto Tor and Onion websites claimed that Blackwatch had developed bioweaponry - a massive violation of human rights, a precedent set by Overwatch’s parent organization, the United Nations.

If this client is correct, then these rumors were true.

The implications were staggering.

Sombra scrolls through some news articles on the allegations, editorials and opinion pieces about them, forum posts where more “average” individuals discuss the evolving situation.

She has an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here.

Sombra opens a blank document page and begins pulling article links, comments, ideas, quotes - anything and everything - assembling them in a haphazard manner. She doesn’t care much about the organization of this stuff - it’s all just background information, all introductory stuff.

No, the good stuff would come in a moment.

She drags her website message to another monitor and heads back into the Tor browser, opening up the link for the bounty hunter chatroom. Everything here was anonymized - you could talk to random individuals but you could never learn who they were, and the only way to contact specific people was to already know their handle in advance. She types the client’s “name” into the find feature and waits for the few seconds it takes to pull up the chat.

The chat was a one-time use kind of thing: it would exist only until both members left, and then it would be deleted and scrubbed from the internet. Sure, both parties could save the chat in a multitude of ways, but deleting the log wasn’t for them -

It was for the chatroom hosts - to claim plausible deniability should anything...messy arise.

The unique chat snaps open and Sombra launches in head-first:

[Sombra]: this project of yours

[Sombra]: what is your price?

---

Sombra sits back and watches the news for a bit - the American anchor is talking about some hijo de puta politician who was caught doing something corrupt - and she is only half-paying attention to the story when a small blip catches her ear. She swivels back to the main monitor:

[Masked.Shrike]: I am willing to pay any price.

---

Sombra scowls, and then grins fiercely.

This person was important.

Excelente.
[Sombra]: my asking price is high
[Sombra]: and I charge additional fees based on the level of work and risk
[Masked.Shrike]: So you would prefer to hack into Blackwatch and copy the program?
[Sombra]: that depends
[Sombra]: I have some questions for you first
[Masked.Shrike]: I anticipated as much.
[Sombra]: you will answer them truthfully
[Masked.Shrike]: ...How could you possibly verify that?
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: who do you think wrote this chat program?

---

Sombra is not the chat system’s host - that was some shady ass small company running a bunch of Tor websites and proxy servers across the globe. In the beginning, it had been a small, simple program designed to function as a failsafe should their other programs get netted by some government somewhere. When Sombra had developed it, she had made it the securest, most streamlined service she could offer.

About a year later, she hacked into them and put in her own backdoor code - two of them, actually: one for the company that had hired her (the “more obvious” of the two codes) and one for herself.

Failsafe, de verdad.

[Masked.Shrike]: ...Even so, there are some things I will not answer.
[Sombra]: that is not what I want to hear
[Masked.Shrike]: I suspect I know the topics you want to ask on.
[Masked.Shrike]: I will pay any monetary price for this project, whether you choose to hack or to code.
[Masked.Shrike]: I will answer a surprising number of questions as truthfully as I can.
[Masked.Shrike]: But I will not answer things that I feel will endanger or risk the lives of those I aim to protect.
[Masked.Shrike]: To make up for it, you may contact me under this handle for as long as I am alive.
[Sombra]: que carajos
[Sombra]: are you serious?
[Masked.Shrike]: Based on the fact that your website runs in both English and Spanish, I suspect we are not in the same area or region of the world.
[Masked.Shrike]: And I will not jump on a random transport ship to be at your beck and call.

[Masked.Shrike]: But should you require my services in the Middle East, they are yours.

---

Sombra takes a second to remember to breathe.

She has *literally* never had anyone ever offer their services in exchange for her work before.

And more than that

She has *literally* never had anyone basically swear their loyalty to her for life before.

It is far too early in the morning to be getting drunk -

*But this is intoxicating.*

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: mierda

[Sombra]: you REALLY want this program

[Masked.Shrike]: I considered asking you to copy the program from Blackwatch and delete the original.

[Masked.Shrike]: But I fear that will lead to unpredictable repercussions for some people I will give anything to protect.

[Masked.Shrike]: But it is of the HIGHEST importance that a back-up copy of this program exists in the world, away from those who will try to steal it.

[Masked.Shrike]: And it needs to happen NOW. Before someone in Overwatch or Blackwatch does something stupid and either destroys it or hides it.

[Sombra]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: Having someone in Overwatch or Blackwatch destroy it would be the most preferable ending of all possible “bad outcomes.”

[Masked.Shrike]: If they hide it, someone else can still get to it. And if they fail to protect it from some of the greatest evils in the world…

[Masked.Shrike]: Then God help us all.

[Sombra]: why are you telling me all of this?

[Sombra]: you must be aware I can sell all of this information

[Sombra]: or pass it on to people who very much want to see Overwatch fail

[Masked.Shrike]: I do not care. This is a necessary target I must put on myself.

[Masked.Shrike]: I know you will probably keep a copy of the program for yourself.
[Sombra]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: I do not know you, but I know your kind.

[Masked.Shrike]: You will not reveal such an ace early on in your game.

[Masked.Shrike]: If you retain a copy, you will keep it safe and secure.

[Sombra]: how is that any different than someone else hiding a copy?

[Masked.Shrike]: Because you will use me before you use it.

---

This is truly - truly - the most interesting conversation Sombra has ever had in her life.

This person is willing to lay their life and services at her feet for her to retrieve or recreate this program.

It is the most tantalizing offer she has ever received.

Sombra smiles viciously, eyes wide, glowing from the light of the monitors.

[Sombra]: what even is this program?

[Masked.Shrike]: You will know sooner or later, so it does not matter if I tell you.

[Masked.Shrike]: The program is a proprietary development listed under Blackwatch to insert code into the bio-mechanical nanobots that comprise the most significant component of biotic healing fluid and cause them to initiate healing in selected individuals and selected individuals ONLY.

[Masked.Shrike]: It was originally proposed as a means to provide selective healing to Overwatch and Blackwatch agents ONLY during field missions.

[Masked.Shrike]: However, it was then proposed that an additional code could be inserted into the nanobots.

[Masked.Shrike]: This code would cause the nanobots to actually initiate tissue destruction, harm, and degeneration in all individuals that the nanobots did NOT have a code for.

---

Sombra is not a doctor or a medic or an academic, but she knows enough about biotechnology to understand the words, even if they are in long, terrible English.

This program takes biomedical nanobots - robots so small and so miniscule that they can painlessly enter the bloodstream and begin providing healing and cell restoration in mere seconds - it takes robots whose sole existence is to heal and help -

And makes them cause destruction, internal bleeding, and possibly even death to people instead.

In other, simpler words:
It is a program designed to create weaponized biomedicine at the push of a button.

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: mierda

[Sombra]: if I am reading this correctly

[Sombra]: this is a biological weapon

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes.

[Masked.Shrike]: It will get out into the world one way or another.

[Masked.Shrike]: Assassins, hitmen, security officials - soon, many of them will be using this technology for good and for evil.

[Masked.Shrike]: I initially hoped it would be quarantined within Blackwatch for many years to come.

[Masked.Shrike]: But the current information leaks show that is not probable.

[Sombra]: So all the allegations are true?

[Masked.Shrike]: I have not read through all of them.

[Masked.Shrike]: But the ones I have read...yes.

[Sombra]: which ones?

[Masked.Shrike]: It will just be easier for you to ask me about the ones you wish to know.

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: So Blackwatch exists?

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes.

[Sombra]: For how long?

[Masked.Shrike]: Blackwatch was created nine years ago - almost ten now.

[Sombra]: and it was always intended to be covert ops division?

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes. It existed to carry out covert, clandestine, and black operations that Overwatch could not.

[Sombra]: is it true that Gabriel Reyes is the commander?

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes.

---

Now *that* was a big deal.
The former Commander of Overwatch, one of the most revered heroes of the Omnic Crisis, and one of the most popular political figures in México - despite not even being a Mexican citizen - being ousted as the commander of Blackwatch would cause massive consequences and outcry.

It is entirely within the realm of possibility that Gabriel Reyes, arguably humanity’s savior Could be tried as a war criminal or humans rights abuser ...by his own organization.

There is only one way to describe this.

[Sombra]: mierda

[Masked.Shrike]: Ha. Indeed.

[Sombra]: was Gabriel the one who created the division?

[Masked.Shrike]: No.

[Masked.Shrike]: All division leaders of Overwatch approved the creation of Blackwatch.

[Sombra]: ...are you serious??

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes.

[Masked.Shrike]: The vote was unanimous.

[Sombra]: ...that includes the divisions of the sciences and medicine??

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes. Zhou and Ziegler both approved the creation.

[Masked.Shrike]: Strike-Commander Morrison is the one who thought of creating Blackwatch in the first place.

[Masked.Shrike]: Technically, he did not need anyone’s approval for this action.

---

**Impossible.**

Everyone’s favorite hero - the face of Overwatch himself, the golden protector of humanity, the friend of Omnics -

Jack Morrison -

She sees his limp figure sitting in the soft shadows of a patio in Dorado, blue eyes as vacant and as empty as the sky, and a small, twitching shudder runs through him before his eyes suddenly regain a little focus and he processes the small girl in front of him -

There’s blood covering his blue Overwatch uniform -

Had been the one to think of Blackwatch??

And moreover -
He could have created and approved of the division all on his own??

[Sombra]: QUE

[Sombra]: no

[Sombra]: he would have needed UN oversight or approval

[Masked.Shrike]: No.

[Masked.Shrike]: Not for Overwatch’s internal affairs.

[Sombra]: wait

[Sombra]: does that mean that Morrison is complicit in this??

[Masked.Shrike]: ...Yes.

[Masked.Shrike]: I probably should not say that, but it will come out sooner or later.

[Masked.Shrike]: Morrison is more than just complicit.

[Masked.Shrike]: He worked on several Blackwatch missions himself.

[Sombra]: what the fuck

[Masked.Shrike]: By my estimate, Morrison was involved in...60-70% of Blackwatch’s affairs. But it is difficult to say. I was only aware of half of them myself.

[Masked.Shrike]: If that.

[Sombra]: what is your position?

[Masked.Shrike]: I will not answer that.

[Sombra]: are you the one leaking information?

[Masked.Shrike]: Absolutely not.

[Sombra]: were you a member of Blackwatch, Overwatch, or both?

[Masked.Shrike]: I will not answer that either.

[Sombra]: were you a division leader?

[Masked.Shrike]: I will not answer that.

[Sombra]: Are you currently a part of the organization?

[Masked.Shrike]: No. I am only a bounty hunter.

[Sombra]: why did you leave?

[Masked.Shrike]: No answer.

[Sombra]: what do you intend to do with this program?
[Masked.Shrike]: Use it.

[Sombra]: que carajos

[Sombra]: after everything you just said

[Sombra]: you plan to use it??

[Sombra]: doesn’t that make you exactly what you did not want to happen??

[Masked.Shrike]: Yes.

---

Sombra feels an electric shiver run through her like a cenote current, pushing forward unseen beneath limestone and trees and sky.

There are people with such power in the world -

People she wants to know.

People she wants to play with.

[Sombra]: what the fuck

[Sombra]: what the fuck are you??

[Masked.Shrike]: A bounty hunter.

[Sombra]: why would you use it exactly for the reason you don’t want others to??

[Masked.Shrike]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: I am not in the organization anymore.

[Masked.Shrike]: But my work is not done.

[Masked.Shrike]: There are still people who need to be protected.

[Masked.Shrike]: I cannot stop fighting.

[Masked.Shrike]: Not yet.

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: you are a bounty hunter

[Sombra]: not a hero

[Masked.Shrike]: The only difference between the two is in the eye of the beholder.

[Sombra]: you are going to use a biological weapon

[Sombra]: to hurt people
[Sombra]: for money


[Masked.Shrike]: I killed people in the name of peace.

[Sombra]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: At least this time, I will only be hurting them, I will be paid for it, and I will still rid the world of evil.

---

This is a whole new game.
A whole new game for her to play.

A whole new game for her to analyze, hack into, insert herself into, copy down code by code, and then - and then -

Dismantle

Code by code.

The Maya believed the cenotes were the watery underworld of the universe, where the dead returned their souls to the bloodstream of the world, so the ceiba tree could continue to thrive and connect the three worlds of the universe - Xibalba, the earth, and the heavens.

But here, now, in this day and age, hundreds of years after the last great Mayan cities fell, after her ancestors had been torn from their temples of power and ancient magic -

Sombra has discovered a world deeper than Xibalba.

A world beneath the cenote current.

And she -

She would cement her place in the myths by being the first to explore it.

She would make herself a hero.

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: now THAT

[Sombra]: is what I want to hear

[Sombra]: that is the kind of verification I need

[Masked.Shrike]: I am glad we were able to reach an agreement.

[Masked.Shrike]: Arguably some of the best in the world.
[Sombra]: fuck yeah
[Sombra]: a challenge
[Sombra]: why did you not want the original deleted?
[Masked.Shrike]: I fear that it will only cause more problems than help.
[Masked.Shrike]: It is almost certain that whoever is leaking the information is aware of the program and the project.
[Masked.Shrike]: My concern is that deleting it will only cause further accusations of tampering with evidence.
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: you mean against Gabriel Reyes?
[Masked.Shrike]: Among others, yes.
[Sombra]: if I can get into Blackwatch
[Sombra]: what makes you think I won’t take more?
[Sombra]: or come back later?
[Masked.Shrike]: If you can get into Blackwatch, then you are free to do whatever you wish.
[Masked.Shrike]: I already said, you are not the kind of person to show your hand early.
[Masked.Shrike]: I do not mind giving you more ammunition if it leads you to fight in the war.
[Sombra]: …
[Masked.Shrike]: The world could always use more heroes.
[Masked.Shrike]: Even if they would rather call themselves bounty hunters and hackers.
---

Sombra flashes a wicked, vivid, backlit grin, like a candle casting light out from the inside of a skull. She is ready to play.

--------

Do you think of me when you look to the sea?

I know it's hard to grow when you're pushed to your knees.

I know our time will pass - your love, it will last.

Darling, we will never break.
Soldado: Beyond the Sea

Saturday, July 4, 2076: 12:38 p.m. - Dorado, México (lol due to time differences this actually takes place after the next couple of chapters)

He steps off the train and despite the heat, the light breeze carries the fresh feeling of the sea.

76 pauses in the train station, the bag with the heavy pulse rifle and the majority of his clothes slung up on his right shoulder, his left hand carrying the other bag full of smaller supplies like extra biotic field vials, and despite the bustle of the disembarking passengers around him, he shuts his eyes for a brief second -

One-two

He feels the air of the sea against his tired, weary, scarred skin -

Three-four

Dorado will always be a small piece of home for him.

76 opens his eyes and sets off again, heading into the brightly lit, colorful train station. Even here, on the outskirts of the hilly city, there are lights everywhere: strung up in strands inside and out of the station, strapped across trains, set atop poles and lamps, glowing even during the day. Some would call the display of radiance excessive, wanton, arrogant, but 76 thinks -

He thinks they’re beautiful.

[A sound,
A light that rips through the night,
Now too far away.]

And true, 76 has always had a fondness for brightness - for warm suns and sparkling beaches, for shimmering stars and soft sunshowers, for candles in churches and the glow of datapads in the darkness -

For smirking, arrogant, charming smiles set into a deep, rich, scarred face, radiating light like sunbeams -

But 76 knows that the lights display here in Dorado is not just for show, it is not just glitter and gold, not just a constant sensation of liveliness and pizzazz -

Not merely for decoration.

No, 76 knows that the lights are a memorial, a grief -

A small, feeble, human attempt to capture a glimmer of the mourning morning, of the desperate dawn, of the cresting of the sun over the eastern sea -
A small, feeble, human attempt to guide the dead and the lost and the restless spirits of Mexico’s tumultuous history and pains to the water of the cenotes, to the thunderstorms sleeping in the hills, to the greatest plain of Xibalba in the world: the grand Gulf itself -

To where water and earth and the heavens meet - to where eternity meets itself.

[But when I follow my heart, it leads me to you]

The lights are a memorial to what Dorado has lost And to everything it has gained.

Because 76 knows -

He exits the train station and stands on the platform on the edge of the hill. He stares out at the city sprawling like dropped dyed sugar cubes and flower petals that slipped from giant hands - bright swathes of color splashed across green verdant hills - tumbling down large knolls and small mountains to the sea painting the horizon, blue upon blue upon blue. Even under the warm, radiant sun, the lights gimmer and glitter all the way down to the sweeping cut of the water, where boats bob like small seabirds alighting on the surface for their meals, and where seagulls and sandpipers fly overhead like transport ships.

The city is vibrant now.

The city is life itself - gold lights and rainbow colors weaving it together into the waters of the land and sea -

The city grows like the ceiba -

Watered at its roots by the blood of the dead, who are guided home by the lights.

Because 76 knows -

[And I'm weak from everything that I'm told.

Yes, I'm weak from everything that I'm told.

And I'm weak from all the things that I know.]

76 knows the sacrifices the city made upon the chacmools of its hills to survive the longest night.

La Medianoche -

The eternal Midnight.

76 tears his eyes away from the sea -

To the massive pyramid - cut of sea-green glass and white-steel beams - sitting on the edge of where the city meets the Gulf, glowing faintly against the harder, heavier, more vibrant light of the sun.

Leave it to Guillermo to be a massive fucking asshole about his displays of power.

Couldn’t just settle with saving Mexico, huh? 76 thinks dryly, Had to out-do your own ancestors and build a pyramid that functions like a fucking night-light?

He spots several more LumériCo pyramids dotting the surrounding hills and sighs to himself.
76 forces his feet to move forward. As much as he could stare at the sea all day, he has to start settling back into the city.

It’s easy enough to break into things like Watchpoints or banks or what the fuck ever, and shit, he could probably break into LumériCo tonight if he fucking wanted to.

But he’s not here just to smash in, grab weapons, and run.

No, he’s here to try and get a pulse on things, to try and start reeling in some of those threads - invisible, imperceptible - that tie all these connections together.

There are no coincidences.

Only connections between the larger forces we do not yet have the ability to perceive.

And 76 knows - he just knows -

LumériCo is one of those.

Oh, sure, he’ll give Sombra - esa pendeja - proper credit: the business card for Portero had been cute, real fuckin’ cute, but even without her help, he already knew LumériCo had been involved in the construction of the fusion bomb from the email at Grand Mesa, and he knew from the same email that it had been shipped from here in Dorado, from one of these gaudy, glitzy, Guillermo pyramids.

Still, Sombra had just driven home the point that this place was meant to be his next destination, his next point of connections, as he followed the threads that wove together the bloodstreams of the world.

He does not want to rush this, even though he would love nothing more than to keep running, to stay in motion -

To never be idle again.

Facito aliquid operis, ut te semper diabolus inveniat occupatum.

Always do something, so that the devil always finds you occupied.

...76 knew very well what his idle hands were capable of.

A brief flash of shivery, feverish ache twists across the skin and joints of his forearms and wrists, but he pushes that aside and focuses on the odd little lumps bouncing in his side pocket, concentrating on how they bump against his leg, against the little pocket knife, against the wallet and keys, against the soft press of knobbed black cotton -

[Do you think of me when you look to the sea?]

I know it’s hard to grow when you’re pushed to your knees.

He will never be idle again.

...Though he’s surprisingly content with slowing down a little and taking his time here in Dorado.

It may be one of the seats of Guillermo Portero’s power, but it will always be a part of 76’s personal history - a part of his mythology of home.

Because try, try as he might -
76 will never forget one of the most horrific, ruthless, fear-laced weeks of his life.

La Batalla de Setenta y Dos.

The Battle of 72.

76’s soul aches with its knowledge and its bloodstream memories.

[I know our time will pass - your love, it will last.

Darling we will never break.]

Prior to the Crisis, Dorado had been little more than a sleepy harbor town nestled into quiet hills on the outskirts of Laguna Verde. The only real lugar de importancia at that time had been the Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant, and even that had been rather small and quiet in the grander scheme of Pre-Crisis Mexico, supplying a meager 4-5% of the country’s energy. A severe gasoline shortage in the late 2010’s had forced the country to up the plant’s output, but it was the global recessions of the 2020’s that had truly been critical to the small town: Mexico and the United States began joint operations to develop better energy sources to power North America. With boosted production, Laguna Verde and its surrounding area saw a boom in population, resulting in the more current haphazard sprawl of Dorado’s winding streets, vibrant clusters of houses, and tiny, crammed plazas that clings to steep, verdant hills of the region.

When the Crisis hit, Laguna Verde and its surrounding coasts were the only places that stood a fighting chance as Mexico’s already precarious resources and energy sources teetered on the brink - And then they collapsed.

Mexico’s history of shaky political and economic stability caved in, resulting in the massive, Centroamericana-wide energy and resource shortage known as La Medianoche - the Midnight. At its worst, La Medianoche’s blackout resulted in eighty-percent of Mexico without power, without gasoline to rely on, without water or wind-based electrical energy, and for the majority of the Crisis, forty to fifty-percent of Mexico struggled just to maintain survival.

Only Guillermo Portero - then General de Brigada of the Gulf Coast states - recognized the crucial importance of the Nuclear Power Plant in Laguna Verde. He seized control of the region, maximized energy output for the plant, and began directing all non-critical resources to it. His troops defended the area from Omnic attacks and human squadrons alike for nearly the entirety of the Crisis, steadily spreading energy back out from the east coast of the country inwards -

So when the Puebla Omnics launched one last surprise attack on Laguna Verde, Portero’s troops were spread too thin to defend a growing region of stability.

The Omnic forces managed to reach the outer edges of Dorado, destroying parts of the loosely-incorporated town, wrecking buildings and homes and practically slaughtering people in the streets, inching closer to the power plant at the core, but then -

They were stopped in the steep, verdant hills of the area.

Overwatch stopped them in the steep, verdant hills of Dorado.

[Never break, darling.]

Even then - armed with two shotguns and aided by four other people, amid the jungle brush and ceiba trees and painted rubble and bloodstained streets - Gabriel could outwit, outmatch, and
outmaneuver entire squads of Omnis. The then-Commander of Overwatch had masterfully positioned Torbjorn’s turrets amongst the trees and burned out buildings, utilizing his team’s high mobility and diverse skills to lead Bastion unit after Bastion unit into death traps, brick and concrete mazes, Reinhardt’s barrier field, Ana’s grenades, and Jack’s helix rockets. He would guide them to pits and snares, into a wall of turret fire, into rockets and shotgun pellets and into -

Into small, broken cenotes between the cresting hills.

*Do you think of me when you look to the sea?*

At one point, Gabriel even had Reinhardt crack and shatter the earth with his rocket hammer, so that they could create new cenotes by destroying the shallow, brittle limestone directly beneath the feet of Omnis.

They had fought brutally, ruthlessly, and wearily for nearly 72 hours straight in the steep, verdant hills of Dorado before Portero’s troops had managed to swoop in behind the Omnic forces and annihilate them.

*I know it’s hard to grow when you’re pushed to your knees.

I know our time will pass - your love, it will last.*

After that -

After two days of much needed rest and relaxation, two days of sleep and shimmering sand and moments of stolen sunshine on Dorado’s beaches and the soft strums of guitar strings in the Mission under the moon, two days of Ana’s high, clear calls and Reinhardt’s deep, earth-shattering booms and Torbjorn’s rowdy, thrilled chants and Jack’s rainstorm and church bells songs and Gabriel’s resounding smoke and fire choruses -

After two days of recovering in bodies and souls -

Overwatch destroyed the Puebla Omnium.

*Darling, we will never break.*

*Darling, we will never break.*

And Mexico began its long, painful road to recovery.

76 is working through the winding, narrow, uneven streets now, surrounded by buildings of pastels and paints, content just to listen to people chatter and bicker, to children scream with excited delight as they run down the cobblestone, to seagulls and sandpipers call overhead, as the sea breeze grows stronger and the lights -

Even under the bright sunshine -

The lights guide him to a piece of home.

There may be unseen threads connecting this place to something sinister, to something cruel, to something dangerous -

But there are also strands of light and the echoes of waves and distant memories of songs beneath the stars connecting it to him -

To them
To what they once were.

76 knows, even if their organization is dead, even if they are scattered separately to the ends of the earth -

Even if they are now enemies -

Even as clawed fingers crush his windpipe and dig into the skin of this throat and red eyes burn at him from the shadows of a skull -

These memories join the souls of the dead here

Where eternity meets the sea.

76 works his way into the bustling market square, stepping aside as a red truck slowly pushes its way through the meandering crowds of people. He wanders by stands of fruit sellers and fish shops, past the small street carts selling tortas and tacos - smells pretty good, maybe he’ll grab one for lunch once he finds the place - and down to Avenue de la Misión. He heads down the sloping street, drinking in the sounds of the waves and small talk and the thrums of small hover trucks moving behind him, as the Mission bells begin to chime for the new hour.

The apartment he’s rented is back in the other direction - no fucking way was he gonna spend a shitton of money on some vacation rental by the sea.

He’s not here to sightsee.

He’s here to work.

...But he will take a small moment to remind himself of one of the places he loves the most in the world.

One of the places he gave seventy-two hours of his life - seventy-two hours of blood and bullets and biotic fluid and screaming pain - to protect.

76 pauses on the edge of the cobbled cliff, letting the wind of the sea caress him, letting it guide him home.

When the breeze dies down for a moment, he smells fresh-baked bread coming from the orange panadería to his left. He tilts his eyes towards it, before caving to his stomach and heading to the bright, green double doors - cracked open to let the sunshine and sea salt in.

76 peers inside carefully, before stepping in slowly, asking to the empty bakery storefront, “¿Hola? Hay alguien aquí? (tn: Hello? Is there anyone here?)”

A girl of maybe 12 or 13 peeks out from the entryway to what 76 presumes is the kitchen, her brown braids dangling as she looks at him with a critical eye, assessing the scars on his face, his white hair, his...odd sweatshirt in the middle of July in a town on the Gulf of Mexico. Her face forms a small pout but she begrudgingly walks up to the small counter with shelves and displays of fresh breads and rolls and punches a finger at the little, cheap cash register there.

76 smirks at her.

“Te aburres, muchacha? (tn: are you bored, girl?)” he chuckles to her as he approaches the counter, setting his bag in his left hand on the floor, and the girl sighs, her brown eyes expressing a good deal of misgivings and frustration as he leans on the counter, adding with a kind, patient smile, “Ellos
“...Sí,” she admits unhappily, flicking at one of her braids with an idle finger, scowling at the register, “Lo está muy aburrido. (tn: it is very boring)”

“Todos padres pueden ser muy mezquinos, (All parents can be very mean),” 76 says to her sympathetically and she cracks a small smile at that as he continues, “Cuando era puqueño, mis padres me hicieron limpiar maíz para horas. (When I was young, my parents made me clean corn for hours).” She gives him a skeptical look of disbelief and 76 slackens his face and his body and makes a weak pantomime of shucking corn as he pretends to snore. It gets a real giggle out of her and 76 straightens himself back up with a sly smile.

He reaches into his pocket, saying, “Era aburrido en la tren, así que estaba jugando esto. (tn: it was boring on the train, so I was playing this).” 76 pulls out his datapad and flicks it open to the last thing it had been on, before tilting it to her. She glances down and –

A massive grin breaks out on her face.

“Tú lo sabes? (You know it?)” 76 asks her conspiratorially and she laughs, saying, “Pokémon no es para unos viejos! (Pokémon is not for old people)” 76 gives her a semi-fake, semi-real look of shocked hurt, snapping, “No soy viejo! (I’m not old)!”. He places his other free hand proudly against his chest, proclaiming, “Soy vintage. (I am vintage).”

The girl gives him a deadpan stare, before rolling her eyes in an exaggerated, typical teenage manner. 76 is about to tell her “tell that one to your parents” when there’s the sudden rocking thrumming of a truck engine outside and the thud-thud-thudding of bass being played way too loud and a number of rowdy shouts and yells that move into the bakery.

The girl flinches a little - a motion of slight fear that does not escape his sights - and 76 scowls slightly, before turning to assess the new patrons.

There’s four of them, all young men, their varying skintones and heights a testament to Mexico’s mixed past. They’re dressed in gritty greys and blacks, one of them with a badly spray-painted skull on his shirt, another with simplistic bones painted on his, but what really catches his eye are two things. First, the faint, barely-visible paint or tattoo ink covering their bodies in stylized skeletal patterns - he sees it just briefly when they transition from the sunlight to the shadier interior of the bakery, and then it fades back against their skin.

And second - a reminder that does not fade with the lighting - the slack belts of ammo and small shells slung around their hips.

76 eyes narrow slightly as he processes the implications.

Things were not as they seem in Dorado, city of gold and lights.

Los Muertos is not nearly as small time as he had assumed.

“Ay, Alé,” one of the paler ones with a shaved head says loudly to the girl, as they approach the counter, “You gonna give us free bread today, right?”

...English? 76 thinks dryly, Do they think that makes them more interesting? ...Or more impressive?

“N-NO,” the girl - Alé? - stammers, still looking slightly fearful, “You know I can’t do that!”

“Aww, c’mon, niña,” one of the others with darker skin taunts to her, “We know mamá ain’t home -
just give us one roll each. She won’t even notice.”

“No, she’ll know! She will definitely know,” Alé says, and then -

One of the punks lightly kicks 76’s bag on the floor -

**THE FUCKING BIOTIC FIELDS, SHIT** -

Something inside 76 snaps a little.

76 glares at them, their wide, shit-eating grins, their eyes flashing like daggers and knives, before he slowly bends down and picks up the bag, setting it on the counter. He slowly takes his time to open it and prod through the contents - none of his spare biotic fields are broken, thank god - and he slowly zippers the bag closed again, before looking back at them with a languid, lightning-crackling gaze.

“...Old people,” one of them scoffs, “Think they fuckin’ run the world.”

“Can’t you see we’re busy here, old man?” the first punk - a leader of some sorts perhaps? - snaps at him and 76 -

76 fucking *hates* young punks.

But he’s willing to accept that there are some young punks with hearts of gold out there, however rare they are.

Jesse and Lena are testaments to that.

So he would be willing to let this shit slide -

Except that the look of fear and the small flinch of terror that shook Alé still *burns* in his mind.

More than anything else,

76 fucking *hates* bullies.

“...Can’t you see you’re bothering her?” 76 says to them coldly, as though a blizzard cut through the Gulf of Mexico in the middle of July, and they all look at him in mild shock as the depths of his gravel voice rises out of the thunderstorms buried in the hills. The punks glower at him, gritting their teeth and baring their fangs and 76 -

He just wants to fucking *laugh* at how ridiculous they’re being.

Young pups don’t even have all their adult teeth yet -

And here they are, trying to nip at a grown wolf.

“...Why don’t we take a step outside, old man?” one of them growls at him, as the others leer, “But you can take your time - I’m sure you need to grab your walker.”

76 leans up off the counter -

And straightens himself up to his full 6-foot, 1-inch of height -

Just shy of being two meters tall.
And he may be in his early fifties -

But he still has a few hundred pounds of pure muscle woven and structured onto his old bones, giving him the solidness of a fucking brick wall.

He’s not towering over them the way Reinhardt would -

But he does have a small height advantage.

And more than that -

76 knows -

He has years of personal mythos and war carved into his bones and the threaded lights of his soul.

His eyes spark with the roiling of a summer thunderstorm, threatening to transform into a hurricane, threatening to ruin this small town and their fragile gold lights -

After all the sacrifices made -

_Ruined buildings of pastels and paints, people screaming in cobbled streets, limp bodies beneath concrete rubble, Gabriel shouting in the comms in his ear, the air-cracking shots of Ana’s sniper rifle, the roar of Reinhardt’s fury as his shield shakes against Bastion turret fire, Torbjörn flittering in and out of the smoke to plant a turret next to them -_

_The golden glow of a biotic field, filling the air with liquid light life -_

_The smell of pulse munitions -_

_The smell of shotgun shell smoke -_

_Feeling Gabriel’s strong, structured back - a perfect mirror to Jack’s - pressed up against his -_

_Seventy-three hours later, standing before the hundreds upon hundreds of covered bodies - laid out in even rows - as family members scream and sob and weep -_

_Seeing what Dorado had lost in order to gain -_

How dare they be so ungrateful.

How dare they terrify the weak and the small and the young and the good.

How dare they pretend to waltz around in bones and skulls as though the memories and the souls and the lost and the ghosts are but easy costumes to put on.

76 knows.

76 knows what a terror he can be.

He’s not a young warrior anymore -

But that’s just a testament to his strength of will and his ability to survive on the battlefield.

76 grins down at them, his face flashing like lightning across a dark sky to reveal caverns and hills filled with skulls and thunderstorms and dripping, limestone water:

“Damn punks, just fucking try me - I’m well-versed in teaching jackasses like you to mind their
manners.”

The threaded lights of his soul are woven into this place, into ancient hills where the rains sleep, into deep cenotes natural and artificial, into the horizon of blue upon blue upon blue, into strands of light that guide warriors and the dead and the lost and ghosts and memories to home -

Into where he poured seventy-two hours and the blood of those he loved -

Into the light that had burned through the eternal midnight.

They cower back slightly and -

Jack loves seeing that look of fear on someone who deserves it. He bares his fangs, snarling, “Now either pay for the damn bread or step off, assholes.”

He will pour blood and sweat and tears and water and life back into this land, cobble streets and steep, verdant hills, into painted houses and shimmering beaches, into memories of songs under starlight -

He will cut out his own heart and offer it upon the chacmools of the hills -

To protect it again.

Too many pieces of his home have been taken from him by the unchanging, uncaring world.

It will not take this one too.

Whether that is young punks or Portero himself or something deeper, more sinister, lurking in shadows and painted skulls.

They will have to battle him for seventy-three hours for it.

The punks continue to stare at him for a long moment, electricity sparking between them, until the semi-leader of the pack snorts and starts shuffling to the door, saying loudly, “This is stupid. Let’s go get something else to eat.”

76 watches them go - he can feel the tension radiating off Ale behind him - but neither of them relax until they hear the truck speed off up the street.

Ale gives a shuddering sigh behind him, and 76 glances at her, muttering, “Does that happen often?”

She makes a small, sad face, before nodding.

76 looks back to the open doors - sunlight gleaming bright and beautiful through them, carrying in the breeze of the sea on its sunbeams - but he thinks he can taste the sharp snap of a possible storm later as well.

He doesn’t really want to spend the extra money -

But maybe he’ll look for an apartment closer to the beach after all.

...If only so he can smell the fresh bread every day for the next week or so.

He can afford to spend money for some new memories.

76 turns back and gives her a patient smile, and Ale gives him a small look of relief.
“...How much is it for four rolls anyways?” he asks her, “I’m pretty hungry.”

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6 October, 2070: 3:22 a.m.

[Sombra]: I have finished retrieving a copy of the program from Blackwatch.

[Masked.Shrike]: Most impressive!

[Sombra]: getting past their securities was difficult

[Sombra]: probably the toughest crack job yet.

[Masked.Shrike]: Gabriel only hires the best in the world.

[Sombra]: so how come he hasn’t hired me?

[Masked.Shrike]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: Gabriel only hires the second best in the world.

[Sombra]: there we go

[Masked.Shrike]: You can forward your bill to this account. I do not know how long the EncryptID will take to deposit what I predict will be a...very large amount.

[Masked.Shrike]: But it will get to you one way or another.

[Sombra]: don’t worry about it

[Sombra]: I’m not desperate for money

[Sombra]: ...but I do have something to say

[Masked.Shrike]: Of course you do.

[Sombra]: ...You have not been entirely honest with me.

[Masked.Shrike]: How so?

[Sombra]: this program

[Sombra]: it is for a machine that I do not have or know

[Masked.Shrike]: I told you the program works on nanobots.

[Masked.Shrike]: Did you believe it would run on the average computer?

[Masked.Shrike]: Or even an advanced one?

[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: so you cannot use it either

[Masked.Shrike]: I told you, did I not?

[Masked.Shrike]: I will use it.

[Sombra]: where

[Sombra]: where are the files for the machine itself?

[Masked.Shrike]: Now, now.

[Masked.Shrike]: Your project was to either write this program or copy the original.

[Masked.Shrike]: That is all I asked of you.

[Sombra]: hijo de puta

[Sombra]: who the FUCK did you hire to get the machine’s files?

[Masked.Shrike]: No one.

[Sombra]: mierda

[Sombra]: bullshit

[Masked.Shrike]: I told you.

[Masked.Shrike]: I know this project by heart.

[Masked.Shrike]: I am not the best engineer, but…

[Masked.Shrike]: I already have the blueprints.

[Masked.Shrike]: In fact, they are surprisingly common.

[Sombra]: QUE

[Masked.Shrike]: The machine is simply a specialized 3D printer.

[Masked.Shrike]: Recreating it is not particularly difficult.

[Masked.Shrike]: You can find medicalized nanobot printers in any modern hospital.

[Masked.Shrike]: However, getting the materials to produce the nanobots is the difficult part.

[Masked.Shrike]: No ethical hospital or organization is going to sell you the stem cells, proteins, and platelets needed for the biological parts of the nanobots, nor the biotic fluid that keeps them alive.

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: and how exactly do you intend to get yours?

[Masked.Shrike]: Robin Hood was considered a hero, was he not?

[Sombra]: ...an honorable thief?
[Sombra]: first a heroic bounty hunter
[Sombra]: and now an honorable thief
[Masked.Shrike]: Thank you for the program.
[Masked.Shrike]: If you ever need assistance in the Middle East, just ask.
[Masked.Shrike]: You have done the world a true service today.
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: somehow that is not what this feels like.
[Masked.Shrike]: The greatest heroes are never recognized for their contributions.
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: is that what you all told Gabriel too?
[Masked.Shrike]: …
[Masked.Shrike]: Seems like you did more than just copy the program files.
[Sombra]: I always leave myself a backdoor
[Sombra]: I am FAR from done with this
[Masked.Shrike]: Ha.
[Masked.Shrike]: I look forward to seeing you make news, child.
[Masked.Shrike]: But if I may, let me give you some information and advice:
[Masked.Shrike]: Bear in mind that Gabriel has spent almost a full decade as Blackwatch commander.
[Masked.Shrike]: The man is excessively and overly complicated, but he would not put himself through that if he hated every second of it.
[Masked.Shrike]: He took the job of Blackwatch Commander willingly, at the request of Morrison.
[Masked.Shrike]: He was far happier working that job than he was being the Post-Crisis Overwatch Commander.
[Sombra]: …
[Masked.Shrike]: Be very, VERY careful with how you use your ammunition.
[Masked.Shrike]: You are playing with forces much larger than you can begin to perceive.
[Sombra]: …
[Masked.Shrike]: These forces are attempting to take down the most incredible, most wonderful people I have ever had the privilege to know and serve with.
[Masked.Shrike]: And if they cannot stop them…
[Masked.Shrike]: ...Well.

[Sombra]: ...

[Sombra]: I am better than Blackwatch.

[Sombra]: soon, I will have access to Overwatch’s systems too.

[Sombra]: they cannot stop me.

[Masked.Shrike]: ...Child.

[Masked.Shrike]: Have you considered that maybe they do not WANT to stop you?

[Sombra]: ...what

[Masked.Shrike]: Be very, VERY careful, child.

[Masked.Shrike]: I know firsthand what it means to lose this battle.

[Sombra]: okay

[Sombra]: who the FUCK are you?

[Masked.Shrike]: My fight is not yet over.

[Masked.Shrike]: But I have decided to leave the war.

[Masked.Shrike]: My services are yours to use.

[Masked.Shrike]: Contact me when you need assistance.

[[Masked.Shrike] has disconnected]

[Sombra]: ...

[Sombra]: mierda

---

Sombra stares at the screen for a long moment, reorganizing her information in her head. Blackwatch and Overwatch are far, far more pressing - far, far more important in the global scheme of things.

But something urges her on -

Something whispering to follow -

Follow the shadows down.

Sure, Blackwatch and Overwatch are far, far more important -

But something about this is far, far more interesting at the moment.
Sombra flips back to her Tor browser, and begins searching for bounties around the Middle East.

Chapter End Notes

You ever thought about how Ana’s biotic rifle and biotic grenades are bio-weapons?

And how she worked for an organization that, well, wants them completely banned?

The Biological Weapons Convention is:

"It was the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning an entire category of weapons, as States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention undertook “never in any circumstances to develop, produce, stockpile or otherwise acquire or retain:

1. microbial or other biological agents, or toxins whatever their origin or method of production, of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes;

2. weapons, equipment or means of delivery designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in armed conflict.”

The Convention effectively prohibits the development, production, acquisition, transfer, retention, stockpiling and use of biological and toxin weapons and is a key element in the international community’s efforts to address the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."
Check out who the file is being sent to at the top of the image.

Wonder how that went over when the U.N. found out Overwatch and Blackwatch were creating those.

I suppose that the people creating these weapons would be charged as war criminals?

Wikipedia: "The use of chemical and biological weapons in warfare is also prohibited by numerous chemical arms control agreements and the Biological Weapons
Y'all don't know how happy I was when Overwatch released Sombra's room in the Castillo map - especially when I saw that a certain bounty hunter had her picture in there, along with a certain soldier and sharpshooter.

I was also soooooo excited to see that my 3D-nanobot printer idea was basically correct.
I love Sombra and Ana so much! We only got a sneak peak of their interactions, but I promise, Ana is going to show up very, very soon, along with a few other "new" characters in the next few chapters.

Next week: things are looking a little weird in the Black Forest in Germany...

You could say that there's an odd sort of

Mayhem

Starting up near Eichenwalde.
Overwatch: All's Quiet in the Forest

Chapter Summary

Deep in the Black Forest, a sentry encounters an old knight and his squire.

In Numbani, a sparrow asks questions and receives disquieting threats.

In Eichenwalde, an heir finds his patience tested by a creator and her job.

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Chapter Notes

So just as a head's up, next week is looking very busy too. :_; I am very sorry for the slow updates - work has been rough because my team keeps getting called out into the field.

The nice thing is that next week's or the week after's update will probably be some sort of mega upload. Like the Battle of Route 66, this big update will be there so people can take their time and read the battle at their own pace.

Also I forgot to include Hanzo in the character tags, gdi :-

(Also thank you, RubixCube, for the very nice comment that made me smile and rush to update this ahaha)

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Song is "Contact Redux" by Trocadero ft. Meredith Hagan (Youtube)

(I'm so behind on Season 15 omg)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: All’s Quiet in the Forest

We’ve been here so long

Still I remember

The rainy September

Contact
Two, four, one, ten
Two, four, one, ten
Am I transmitting
Is anyone listening?
Contact

----------

Statio: Unum et Solum Unum

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 0817 - the Black Forest, Germany

The forest is peaceful this morning, as it is every morning.

It does not really need sleep, not in the same way the animals do, but it does occasionally put itself into a powered down “sleep mode.” It prefers to do this when Ganymede is asleep, since the bird does not do much at night, so it just so happens to “sleep” at night when the sun disappears behind the hills and the trees and the darkness and stars come out to surround the world.

It knows that this is not how night and day works, but it likes the idea of it - of time rotating around the world, around the forest, as opposed to the world rotating through time.

It wakes this morning to sunlight and chirping bird calls and the soft rustling of wind in the trees, as it does most mornings. It hums a cheerful bweep to Ganymede and swivels its head to look at the nest -

The nest is empty.

...Hmm.

It props itself up and rises to its feet, bweeping curiously. The other bird calls are familiar but not that familiar. It sets off, occasionally calling out to its companion, heading towards the clearing that Ganymede will sometimes fly towards to search for food.

It does not know where Ganymede has flown off to -

“Oh, Rein!”

An unusual cry.

It has not heard this creature before.

What a strange sound.

Very peculiar.

“Look at this one!” Again, a new call, ringing through the hallowed space of the forest. The Bastion feels oddly compelled towards it - it believes that it will find where Ganymede has wandered
“Ahhhh, I have not seen one like this in much time.”

The Bastion pauses.

A different cry.

Its algorithms recognize that although the two cries are very different in tone and pitch, volume and frequency, that there are similar patterns between them. Like how two birds of one kind may sound different - yes, it can understand that form of logic.

So two unique animals, perhaps of the same kind, making strange vocalizations.

The Bastion resumes moving towards them, and - indeed, it hears Ganymede’s call now, twittering and high and up and down in cadence.

“What is it, Rein?” the higher-pitched of the two strange cries calls out, “A greenfinch? A siskin?”

“Hmm, it has been so long, I am afraid I do not think I can remember,” the deeper-pitched calls back, and the Bastion thud-thud-thuds in that direction. Through glimpses of the trees and brush, it can detect two heat signatures - and a third, much smaller, fluttering about, hopping from branch to branch - Ganymede, it recognizes based on previous patterns.

“I will get the book!” the higher-pitched creature replies, and there is a rustling just beyond the trees. The Bastion’s patterns recognize a clearing it is coming back upon - it has been through this way a few times, crossing the meadow to follow Ganymede’s flight.

The Bastion thud-thud-thuds past the last ring of brush and trees into the open sunlight.

“Found it - AHHHHHHHH,” the higher-pitched one shrieks.

Oh.

The Bastion does know these creatures.

These are humans.

Of its own genuine memories, it only remembers what the Omnium central core taught it: humans are messy, disorganized, chaotic, cruel, unjust, greedy, selfish, incapable of true logic. They were odd, hairless apes - fleshy and bipedal, of varying heights and sizes, but those core components of a human’s internal computing did not change despite superficial appearances. The humans would fear them, the humans had feared them; the humans would hate them, the humans had hated them.

The Omnium had ordered the elimination of all humans.

But of the memories it had collected, it remembers the battlefield - the screaming of bombs, the screaming of Bastions, the screaming of humans - yes, humans. How they had fallen, missing parts, beyond repair, crying out much like a wounded deer or bird, falling to the earth, crashing with bombs, with Bastions, with humans.

It remembers how the Bastions and humans screamed.

It remembers how they sounded the same.

It pauses, analyzing these humans. There are only two - the one that had shrieked - like the shriek of
a wounded human on a battlefield - was small, thin, pale-skinned, sitting on a fallen tree on the ground. It had long hair, hair the color of the bark of the trees, and eyes - eyes the color of the sky - eyes that are wide, staring back at it. The other is tall, massive, bigger than the Bastion itself. Even as the other is shrieking, the larger one turns, humming some cadence, holding something that it immediately drops, the thing crash-crash-crashing on the floor of the meadow. This one has hair the color of clouds, one eye the color of the sky and the other -

The other eye is damaged.

Damaged beyond repair.

The Bastion tilts its head a little. The analyzer flashes red-red-red but the Bastion shakes its head and the analyzer goes quiet-quiet-quiet.

It will not damage the forest - damage it beyond repair.

And so, it will not damage these humans - damage them beyond repair.

The three of them situate themselves in silence for a moment, until the smaller one on the fallen tree leans slowly to the bigger one, murmuring softly, “What...do we do?”

“I...do not know,” the bigger one rumbles back, not as softly, but the Bastion thinks it is attempting to be quieter, “I have not seen one of these in a long time either.”

“Where is your armor?” the smaller one asks back softly, and the bigger one slowly-slowly-slowly moves a limb - a hand, the Bastion’s memories tell it, much like the Bastion’s own - points at something just past the fallen tree.

“That is a Bastion unit, right?” the smaller one chirps again to the bigger one, and the bigger one moves - nods, the Bastion remembers - its head up and down, up and down.

What a strange motion.

How peculiar.

The Bastion likes that motion.

The Bastion nods-nods-nods and the two humans jump back a little bit, the big one jerking its hands out in front of it.

“WHOA,” the bigger one roars out at it, curling the fingers of its hands into fists, “Whoa, whoa, we are...we are not...uh...we do not want to fight.”

“Rein...” the smaller one vocalizes to it softly, “You live for fighting.”

“Brigitte, zees es not ze time,” the bigger one grumbles back to it, again, attempting to be quieter. They both flinch a little as a flutter of yellow floats into the airspace of the meadow, and Ganymede flutters around-around around the Bastion’s head a few times before -

The Bastion raises its left limb, extending its second finger to Ganymede, who alights on it.

Ganymede twitters and sweeps at the Bastion, chattering away in its up and down cadence to it.

The Bastion’s analyzers process many of the sounds, the chirps and the calls, fluttering the symbolic message into its logic systems.
Ganymede likes these humans.

These humans gave Ganymede some food.

These humans admired Ganymede’s bright color.

Ganymede likes these humans.

The Omnium had ordered the elimination of all humans.

But the Bastion likes what Ganymede likes,

For the Bastion likes to help Ganymede.

“Oh…” the smaller one titters to the bigger one, “The bird likes it!”

“...I think ze bird has a color mutation,” the bigger one rumbles slowly, but rather loudly, and the smaller one hisses back, “Rein, this is not the time!”

Ganymede hops up-up-up to the Bastion’s shoulder, and the Bastion turns its head back towards the two humans. The smaller one lifts an open hand in its direction, murmuring as calmly as it can, “Uh...hey there, friend.”

The Bastion opens the palm of its hand in the same gesture.

It bweeps at the small one.

“Mein Gott,” the bigger one gasps as quietly as its loud volume of its voice will allow, “Mein Gott, I cannot believe zees.”

The small one makes a harsh sound at the big one, and then wiggles its fingers in a wavelike pattern at the Bastion.

The Bastion attempts to do the same, but its finger movements are not as refined as the human’s.

“Oooohhh, God,” the smaller one sings softly, and the Bastion beeps out, “Bweeeep beep-bwuh,” mimicking the tone of the smaller one’s vocalization.

“...Did it just say, ‘Oh God’ back? Does it even know what that means?” the smaller one calls to the bigger one, who makes a rolling motion with its shoulders. The Bastion does not try to mimic that one, lest it disturb Ganymede perched on its left side.

They glance at it, still rather shy, it realizes. It reaches into its core memories, searching for the ways it has befriended other creatures in the forest - it had offered some deer some leaves, it had offered a butterfly a flower, it had offered a squirrel some seeds, it had offered Ganymede a stick -

It does not know what humans like.

Neither its core nor borrowed memories contain information on what humans like.

However, neither its core nor borrowed memories contained information on what other creatures liked either.

It had simply learned.

The Bastion looks at them, and then at itself, and reaches its left limb to its right shoulder -
The two humans jump a little but it

It plucks the flower on its shoulder, looks it over, and then holds it out towards them.

All three of them stand there in the stillness of the forest when finally the smaller one gasps, “Oh my god, Rein - what do we do?”

“I...I do not know, Brigitte,” the larger one calls back, and the smaller one responds, “Is it trying to trick us? Does it even know how?”

“I...I do not know. Here, stay here,” the larger one murmurs protectively, taking a step towards the Bastion. It tilts its head, analyzing the stiff walk, and the way the smaller one shudders behind the larger one.

“Be careful,” the smaller one sounds as the larger one approaches. The larger one is tall - just a few centimeters taller than the Bastion at full height, and that is impressive because the Bastion itself is the tallest creature it has seen in the forest.

Until these humans arrived.

“H-hello,” the larger one vocalizes to it nervously, bobbing its head up and down again, like it had before, and the Bastion mimics the head bob, the slow, deliberate way that it moves up and down and up and down. The large one holds up its hands in an open display and the Bastion does not know what this means - it only has one hand, the hand holding out the flower, and it cannot make that motion.

“Good-good little Omnic,” the larger one murmurs to it, and the Bastion tilts its head again, “Very nice little Omnic. You do not want to hurt us, right? Zat ees why you are giving me zees flower, yes?”

The Bastion holds out the flower a little more impatiently, shaking its hand a little, and the larger human flinches but does not shy away, slowly reaching out one of its hands to grasp the flower.

So the flower works.

It records this information.

The smaller one relaxes a bit as the larger one takes the flower, looking it over and over, before looking back at the Bastion - now that it is closer, the Bastion can see more of the details on the human. Not only is it very tall, but it is very wide too, perhaps just as wide across as the Bastion itself. It has a strange color, a shallow color, like the color of the sand in the creek, but the part around its damaged eye is a different color - harder, like the bark of a tree - and the eye is not the color of the sky, but the color of the clouds, the color of snow.

“Is it…” the smaller one asks the larger one, “Is it doing anything?”

“No, it es...it just gave me ze flower,” the larger one says, still looking at the Bastion. The Bastion wonders if it is trying to assess the Bastion in its logic cores as well, just as the Bastion is doing to it.

“Can I - can I come over there?” the smaller one chirps to the larger one and the larger one makes that head bobbing motion again and the Bastion bobs its head along too. The smaller one rises from where it is sitting and slowly approaches - now that it too is standing, the Bastion can see that it is much smaller than the larger one. It barely reaches the height of the larger one’s shoulders, and its width is less than half that of the larger one.
Such variance!

Bastions were almost never any different from one another, not in size or shape.

But people truly were like animals then!

For even birds of the same kind could look very different from one another.

The Bastion supposes that people must be similar.

The smaller one approaches, inspecting the flower in the larger one’s hand, and then looking over the Bastion high and low. Ganymede tweets at it a few times, but it only continues to look. This one has two good eyes, the Bastion realizes, and facial features that display such a range of emotions - the Bastion does not have any information on this.

It begins to record the smaller one’s face.

“IT has all of its parts,” the smaller one says to the larger one, “They are covered in plant growth, but it looks like everything still works. Look, Rein! It even still has the original paint.”

“...Brigitte,” the larger one replies slowly, but the smaller one continues to peer closely at the Bastion, leaning in and looking at its chest-piece, the gun-limb, the swivel in its center. The larger one makes a strange, exhaling sound and vocalizes, “You...you know what zees es, right?”

“A SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 - in great working condition too!” the smaller one states cheerfully and the larger one shakes its head slowly, “It es an Omnic made for killing, Brigitte.”

“Hasn’t killed us yet -”

“Zhey are all supposed to be out of commission!” the larger one cries, and the smaller one makes a strange huffing sound and replies, “Well, apparently Overwatch missed one.”

“How can you be so calm over zees?” the larger one rumbles to the smaller one, who stands back and turns itself towards the larger one, which shouts out, “Think of all the destruction zees could do!”

“So why hasn’t it?” the smaller one says to the larger one, standing up straighter and placing hands on its hip joints and oh -

The Bastion finds that posture interesting!

It separates its feet a little and both humans jolt at the motion but do not run, and it wiggles its shoulders and places its left hand on its core-leg joint and the muzzle of the submachine gun limb on the other joint and it -

“BWEEP,” it chirps cheerfully at them, proud that it was able to mimic the smaller human and they both stare at it with wide eyes until -

There is a strange sound coming from the smaller human.

It almost sounds like the chirp-chirp-chirping of small birds, but it is a little bit deeper and appears to have no direct meaning, as the larger one does not respond to the noise, but instead casts a wide-eyed stare at the smaller one. The smaller one’s posture seems to collapse in on itself - it bends at the waist and places its hands over its stomach and the noise continues, ringing high and clear amongst the hollow of the forest and the Bastion.
Oh, the Bastion likes this sound too!

It relaxes its stance and places its arm-limbs over its core-swivel and it -

“Bweep-bweep-bweep,” it copies the sound the smaller human makes, shaking its body back and forth loosely and this only makes the smaller human respond in kind - it covers its face with its hands as the high, bright sound - like the bubbling of the stream, like the rustling of the wind in the trees - continues harder, more forcefully. The jaw of the larger one drops open as it whispers, “Mein Gott…”

“It is amazing!” the smaller human says loudly, gesturing to the Bastion which stands up straighter again, and then the smaller human turns back to the larger one, saying, “Rein!”

“No, Brigitte!”

“Please, Rein - look at how nice it is!”

“A - a Bastion es not a pet!” the larger one growls loudly, “It es a killing machine!”

“It just laughed, Reinhardt!”

“It copied what it saw you do!” the larger one insists again, and the smaller one folds its arms across its chest and makes that huffing noise again, saying, “I like it.”

“Brigitte!”

“It gave you a flower!”

“...I...Yeah, I do not know where it learned that,” the larger one says, looking at the flower it is still holding. The smaller one perks up, crying, “Maybe it knows where Eichenwalde is!”

“...We are NOT lost,” the larger one grumbles, the hair above its eyes narrowing and the line of its mouth drawing out, and the smaller one rolls its head before murmuring, “Reinhardt, we have been wandering in this forest for two days and we cannot find the trail. We are lost.”

“I am telling you, I know how to get to Eichenwalde - ”

“Hey, hey, uh - Bastion? Can I call you that?” the smaller one says to the Bastion and it tilts its head. It darts over to the fallen tree where it had been, grabs something from a small bag sitting on the ground, and rushes back over. It holds up a picture and the Bastion tilts its scanner at it.

“Do you know where this place is?”

It is a picture of a tall building, pointed like trees but built out of stone, wide and large and sitting amongst the forest like a giant, asleep and dreaming of becoming a mountain -

Oh!

The Bastion knows this place.

The Bastion passes through it all the time.

“Bweep!” the Bastion cries to the smaller human happily, before swiveling forty-nine-degrees to the right and gesturing with its gun-limb. The smaller human makes a loud noise and the larger human makes a softer, grumbly noise. The smaller human reaches out with its hand and pats the larger human on its arm, saying to the larger human, “There, there, Rein. Tell you what, if it makes you
feel better, you can wear your armor around the Bastion until we leave the forest. Is that okay?"

“...But what about YOU, Brigitte?” the larger one murmurs quietly to the smaller one, “I cannot always protect you.”

“I will put on my gear too, don’t worry,” the smaller one says but the large one tilts its head towards the smaller one and oh -

The Bastion does not like that look on the larger one’s face.

It looks very upset.

It looks like how the Bastion felt when it cut down part of the forest.

“...You know,” the larger one hums to the smaller one softly, “You know how bad ze Bastions can be, right?”

“...I am still a Lindholm, Reinhardt. Of course I know. We are just going to Eichenwalde for a few hours and leaving. It has shown us no hostility and even knows how to get there. We will be okay.”

“...Balderich would be ashamed zat a Bastion has to lead us there,” the larger one huffs and the smaller one makes that clear bubbling sound again, chirping, “Balderich would be happy that the Bastion gave you a flower to put on his armor.”

“...We should have come in from Stuttgart,” the larger one murmurs and the smaller one cries, throwing its hands and arms high into the air above it, “You are the one who wanted to go through the forest!”

The Bastion bweeps loudly at the cheerful cries of the humans.

It is happy.

It is happy that they are not damaged beyond repair.

It is happy to hear not the screams of Bastions and humans,

But the sounds of their happiness.

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We are green and gray
The longness of semper
Still I remember

Contact

Two, four, one, ten
Two, four, one, ten
Am I still willing
To foot all this billing?

Contact

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雀 (Suzume): Wrong Questions

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 11:17 a.m. - Numbani, Nigeria

The man at the desk of the Numbani branch of Vishkar is not impressed with Genji’s excuses.

“You will need to make an appointment,” he states to him as impassively as ever, “And it will need to be through the proper channels.”

“But -”

“If that is all, I will be asking you to leave the premises, Mr. Suzume,” the man says, rising and gesturing to the doors behind them. Genji stares at him for a long moment before bowing slightly, and turning around, heading back outside - Zenyatta floating alongside him.

“It was a valiant effort, Genji,” Zenyatta comforts him when they are outside in the blinding sun, “But not all paths will be open to you in this manner.”

“I knew this,” Genji admits, “But I needed to try, Zenyatta.”

“Of course. All paths are worth trying to see where they lead,” his teacher says serenely, and Genji is about to retort when he sees a group of formally-dressed Vishkar employees leave the building out a side door, heading to a transport car -

Sanjay Korpal, a small blurb reads on his faceplate scanner as it detects the man in the front of the group, Lead Design Architect and a Proposal Manager for Vishkar Corporation. Best known for his project in Rio de Janeiro -

“This way, Master,” Genji says, darting off in the direction of the group, “Another path has opened up for us.”

“Excellent, my student,” Zenyatta hums cheerfully, following along after him. Across the street, Sanjay opens a door to a wide transport truck, and ushers his architechs inside, and Genji bolts up to him, skidding to a stop just before the lead architech.

Sanjay seems entirely unsurprised to see the cyborg ninja burst into his personal space, and Genji wonders if anything perturbs these Vishkar workers.

“May I assist you with something?” Sanjay asks him, and Genji straightens up before offering him a polite introductory bow, explaining, “Mr. Korpal, I am Suzume of Atlas News. I have been
attempting to speak with someone from your Numbani branch for an editorial piece on the renewed growth of the city - however, I am afraid that no one has returned my messages.”

“This is truly unfortunate,” Sanjay replies calmly as Zenyatta pops up beside them. Shockingly, a look of surprise blooms on the architech’s face, and he turns to the Omnic monk, stating with a semi-questioning tone, “A Shambali monk?”

“Indeed,” Zenyatta offers unhelpfully, and Sanjay presses his hands together before bowing to Zenyatta, replying, “Namaste, enlightened one.”

“Namaskar,” Zenyatta says back, clapping his hands together and bowing himself as much as his floating, seated position will allow. Genji finds himself bowing again simply out of habit.

“I am very surprised to see you out of the Monastery,” Sanjay admits, and then flicks his gaze back to Genji, adding hesitantly, “And with a news reporter.”

“He is merely a researcher,” Zenyatta corrects him while also lying through his nonexistent teeth, “And I am here on behalf of the Monastery to conduct more proactive Omnic-Human relationships. We are focusing on the impact of Numbani on this matter.”

“...Not on the city’s growth?” Sanjay asks with some confusion and Genji hastily corrects him, lying through his existent teeth, “Ah, forgive me - the city growth piece is a subset of the editorial. It is part of a much larger piece on changes in Omnic-Human relationships.”

“Is that so?” the architech asks with mild skepticism, but seems to conclude the matter to himself, “I do recall that Tekhartha Mondatta is pushing for a more active stance in this regards. I had not realized that it would be so sudden, though.”

“Mondatta is quite whimsical like that,” Zenyatta admits, and Genji decides it’s not really a lie, just an...interpretation of the Shambali leader. Zenyatta continues, “It took much convincing, but once convinced, Mondatta often sees matters to their end.”

This, too, is true.

“If it is possible,” Zenyatta continues, “We would like to accompany you and ask you a few questions about your work here in Numbani. Nothing formal or in-depth, just some key points.”

Genji could worship him for his liquid ability to “go with the flow.”

Sanjay looks at them with mild distrust, but asks calmly, “You will not record our work?”

“Of course not,” Genji lies once more, “And we are all familiar with the fact that hard light technology cannot be replicated from recordings alone.” This is true - many had tried, including Winston. And if Winston could not succeed, Genji knew of no one who could.

Sanjay eyes them both, but relents with a sigh, “Very well. I will not deny help to a student of Mondatta. But it shall have to be quick. We have a very strict schedule to follow today.”

“Of course,” Genji states and Zenyatta bows slightly in gratitude, “We shall be very efficient.”

Efficient. A Vishkar worker’s favorite word.

“Then please,” Sanjay gestures politely to the truck and with a quick, affirming look at his master, Genji steps inside, followed shortly by the Omnic monk. None of the six architechs look even remotely surprised to see them, four of them sitting quiet and still and two of them adjusting the
settings on their construct arms, fiddling with small hard light objects before adjusting the dials and knobs again.

Genji and Zenyatta seat themselves in the inward-facing chairs, and Sanjay joins them, shutting the truck’s doors behind them, and the transport car sets off. Sanjay takes a moment to seat himself across from Zenyatta, and informs them, “We are going to work on the Heritage Museum today - it requires some additions to the building to prepare it for the upcoming Overwatch exhibit.”

“They are working on expanding it?” Zenyatta asks him serenely, and Genji secretly begins the recording. Sanjay nods, saying, “The United Nations has put forward some extra educational funding to support the development of the building. Numbani city officials are anticipating extra tourism when the Scourge Exhibit opens up this coming spring, so they hired us to expand the dimensions of the main building.”

“Is the timing of it not strange to you?” Genji asks, and Sanjay tilts his head towards him, asking, “I do not follow what you mean. The timing of the project or the timing of the exhibit?”

“Both,” Genji clarifies, “The United Nations will be entering its sixth year since Overwatch’s official disbandment - would it not have been a better anniversary to celebrate earlier this year?”

“Ah, yes,” Sanjay says, but Genji notes the slight - very slight - twitch of his eyebrows and adds a small blip to his recording. Sanjay smooths his hands along his thighs, sighing softly, “There were some...negotiations that had to be handled earlier this year by Vishkar and the city, and the United Nations were not able to allocate the funding for the exhibit until last month. The United Nations believes that pushing the exhibit back a year will not hinder tourism in the area.”

“Is there a high demand for such an exhibit?” Zenyatta asks and Sanjay gives an open gesture with his hands, “I am not certain. Vishkar is a construction company, not marketing.”

The transport truck slows to a stop and Sanjay rises from his seat, opening the door to the bright sunlight. The rest of them stand and exit the truck, and Genji’s faceplate transitions the lighting for him automatically. The Heritage Museum entrance stands before them, and the Vishkar architechs set off automatically towards the building, while Sanjay leads the other two behind them.

“With this project, we will be expanding the B and C wings of the museum,” Sanjay explains to them, as they enter the bright, warm atmosphere of the building. Inside are exhibits of Omnic artworks, Nigerian textiles, a history of the city, and the like, and Sanjay leads them through the displays with expert precision.

“Have you done much work in the city?” Genji asks him and Sanjay considers the question, replying, “Hmm, yes, we have been very busy. As you are aware, the city has been undergoing renewed growth, and there is a large population movement in the last few years as more and more Northern and Western Africans - both humans and Omnics - come to the city to engage in the expanding business opportunities.”

“Vishkar has been contracted by numerous companies, I hear,” Genji continues, surprised by the man’s quick pace, “You have been asked to construct more buildings in the central parts of the city.”

“You are well-researched. Yes, several companies have asked us to begin constructions on privately-held lands for their new Numbani branches. Hmm, I cannot say too many names - the details are private, you see - but many of these companies are looking to expand their opportunities here in West Africa. Numbani is the place to do it,” Sanjay informs them and Zenyatta asks quietly, “These companies - they will be hiring Omnic workers as well as humans?”
“Many of them are pro-Omnic developments, if that is what you are asking,” Sanjay says and Genji decides to go the blunt route.

“We have heard that Volskaya is considering leaving the area - would you know anything about this?”

They’ve reached the B wing of the museum, and Sanjay’s architechs are already setting up their equipment, some of them expanding holo projectors with blueprints and technical documents while the others begin placing hard-light projection points at certain segments of the roof, floor, and walls. Sanjay gives the cyborg an unreadable look, but sighs, “You are indeed well-informed. I have heard similar talks concerning Volskaya Industries, though I do not know details.”

“This is troublesome to the Shambali,” Zenyatta lies convincingly to him, “We are very interested in ensuring that Volskaya continues on its path to better acceptance of Omnics. Having Volskaya’s presence in the city was reassuring that the company was on this path.”

“Is that how the Shambali were interpreting it?” Sanjay asks him, but Genji thinks he gets an undertone of suspicion in the man’s voice. Zenyatta inclines his head slightly, speaking in a low tone, “This is the attitude towards Volskaya that Mondatta encourages among us, yes. Enemies are merely friends you have not made yet.”

Sanjay snorts at that, adding, “An optimistic outlook. Volskaya is not your friend.”

“They are your competitors, are they not?” Genji says and Sanjay gives him a sidelong glance, adding, “We compete in certain circles, but we largely operate in different sectors. Vishkar offers very competent proposals that build on a harmonious whole rather than in piecemeal like Volskaya. We have very different attitudes towards the construction of this city.

“And truly,” Sanjay continues, looking back out at his architechs who are beginning to -

Beginning to simply remove parts of the B wing.

Whole segments of steel beams and window panes in the ceiling begin to disappear in bright flashes of blue light, and the three of them watch in quiet observation as the “demolition” goes anti-entropically smoothly - nothing explodes, nothing is destroyed, nothing dissolves into dust.

It simply vanishes in a blink of light.

“Truly,” Sanjay says after a pause, “Should we not be the ones to represent the interests of the City of Harmony? Vishkar knows the beauty of order and the order of beauty. All of our projects are done with the skill of the traditional carpenter, the efficiency of robotics, and the grace of the artist. Everything in its place, and a place for everything. Do you not see how wondrous it can be?”

Genji and Zenyatta watch in silence.

An uncomfortable silence.

Because while Zenyatta believes in harmony, and Genji believes in Zenyatta -

This is not the harmony of the universe.

This is not the balance of yin and yang, of discord and peace, of night and day, of entropy and order.

This is skewing the balance towards a disquiet quiet, a controlled chaos, an organizational disorder.
And true—there is a magnificent beauty in the work, in watching an entire structure disappear in a matter of moments.

But Genji thinks of the hard stone of the Shambali shrine. He thinks of the painted wood of the Shimada temple. He thinks of the steel halls of the Watchpoints. He thinks of the sandstone structures of Cairo. He thinks of the ancient buildings cut of cliffs in Petra.

He thinks of the grit of stone and gravel and metal, of the pressure of putting them together, of creating something beautiful from the grind, of making order out of disorder.

He thinks of the stitch of blood and bone, sinew and nerve to steel and cable, to wire and chip.

The disquiet of quietness disarms Genji’s guard.

“...And your new contracts with the city and these business—they have nothing to do with the fact that LumériCo is also offering Numbani new fusion cells to power the city?” he asks softly, and he feels rather than hears the electronic quirk of Zenyatta’s shock—it sounds much like a small gasp.

Sanjay remains impassive, clasping his arms behind his back.

“...What occurs with LumériCo is not Vishkar’s business,” the lead design architect states coolly, “The city runs abundantly on solar energy, so what the city decides to do with its energy sources is up to it.”

“...Are you outbidding Volskaya the same way you outbid Calado in Rio?” Genji asks bluntly and Zenyatta gives him a sharp look behind Sanjay’s back. Sanjay himself says nothing for a moment, simply watching as pieces of the building disappear one portion at a time. The three of them stand in tense silence, in disquiet quiet, until—

“When did Atlas News begin hiring cyborgs?” Sanjay asks him, and despite the warmth of the building and Numbani in general, Genji feels a shiver creep up his human spine. Sanjay does not turn to face either of them, but continues in his icy tone, “Cyborg matters are very important to Vishkar. All of our architechs are cyborgs.” Genji watches as the fingers of his construct arm tighten around his normal flesh-and-bone fingers.

“We would be very interested in learning more about you, Suzume.”

Genji grew up in the most fearsome yakuza gumi in Post-Crisis Japan.

He knows a threat when he hears one, especially when it is wrapped in politeness and niceties.

“...How is it that a company which promises harmony and order has yet to hire a single Omnic into its ranks?” Genji asks him, undaunted by the chill of his voice, and he senses Zenyatta tense beside him. Sanjay is silent, but his flesh-and-bone fingers shift themselves within his construct arm fingers.

“...Will you be building an Architech Academy here in Numbani? Will you take on Omnic students? Do they need to be armless to join?” Genji continues, emboldened by the silence.

The silence does not scare him.

For underneath the silence, underneath the disquiet quiet—

Genji hears the musical chimes of Zenyatta’s orbs within his heart.

“...I believe this is enough questions, Suzume,” Sanjay states, dismissing him, “You are prying into
matters that extend far beyond the scope of your article. Questioning the integrity of the architechs of Vishkar is questioning the integrity of Vishkar itself.”

A convenient company policy, it seems.

Genji bows stiffly to him, and Zenyatta follows his lead.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Korpal,” Genji states coolly, turning to leave. But Sanjay says calmly:

“Have you been home recently, Mr. Shimada?”

Despite the brightness and warmth and ever-increasing heat and sunlight as the B wing disappears, Genji freezes. Behind him, there’s a cold, cruel, orderly mirth to Sanjay’s tone:

“...Your brother offers very respectable rates for his services, but I am someone who is willing to negotiate. Tell me - do you offer comparable prices?”

Genji feels his anger rise, feels his fury accelerate, feels the wind of his storm build and froth and swirl as Midori stirs from her slumber around his heart -

“You are mistaken, my friend.”

Zenyatta’s voice is calm, collected - but there is a dark, discordant note to the deep reverberations in his tone:

“My student’s home is at the Shambali Monastery. His brother is Tekhartha Mondatta.”

Genji tilts his head towards Zenyatta, who is facing Sanjay’s back. There is an orb of dark, swirling power hovering over the Omnic’s hands, and the monk inclines his head towards the lead architech, “You and Vishkar will remember that. Tekhartha Mondatta’s services are not for sale - they are free for all to pursue.”

“...You are surprisingly forward for a Shambali monk,” Sanjay states, as some of the chill in his voice eases up, and the orb loses its discordant power, returning itself around Zenyatta’s neck. The monk folds his hands back in his lap, saying with disquiet quiet force:

“I am Tekhartha Zenyatta - it is I who convinced my brother to be bolder and braver in the world. It is I who saved this sparrow. It is I who has seen the unrest in your soul.

“You and Vishkar will remember this.”

Construct arm fingers tense with a cracking sound.

Zenyatta turns to leave with Genji, but he murmurs just loud enough for both of the humans to hear:

“Be careful, Mr. Korpal - when students see much of the world, they will begin to teach themselves. A wise teacher knows when to let go - a cruel teacher knows only restrictions.”

Sanjay stares as yet another piece of the building disappears, before saying unemotionally:

“Vishkar’s students know their place in the world. They know the beauty of order and the order of beauty. They will not leave their harmonious state.

“They will not wish to.”
Riding on our shiny metal horses
Singing a rider's song
One of us will be forgotten
The other will be wrong

Two, four, one, ten
Two, four, one, ten

Am I transmitting
Is anyone listening?

Contact

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相続人 (Sozokujin): Lost...and Found?

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 11:34 a.m. - the outskirts of Eichenwalde, Germany

Relief floods through Hanzo when he finally sees the broken, beaten dirt road curve into a clearing of cobble rubble and broken, beaten Bastion units.

Finally.

It’s taken him and his...employer nearly three hours of hiking and crisscrossing and backtracking - first to find the right trail, then to get back on the right trail, then to get back on the right trail again, then to finally get here, on the edges of the forgotten town in the Black Forest. People in Stuttgart had said that Eichenwalde was “fairly close” to the edge of the forest, “not too far inside,” “easily accessible” by hiking, “just get a good map,” and on and on and on.

None of the people in Stuttgart had encountered Satya Vaswani before, though.

“Ah good,” the Vishkar architech says coolly behind him, “We have made it.”

“...We would have been here a lot sooner if you had just let me read the map in the first place,” Hanzo grumbles, pausing to wait for her. She’s not...slow, per se, but rather moves at a different pace. Satya adjusts her screenglass visor, stopping to assess the closest broken Bastion unit, and before Hanzo processes it, she starts taking measurements with her compact arm and -
“Ms. Vaswani, please,” Hanzo sighs, rubbing at his forehead, where there is a dull ache growing, “Can we focus on the task you were sent here to do?”

“‘Assessing Eichenwalde’ and ‘gathering measurements on Balderich von Alder’s armor’ are the tasks I was sent here to do,” Satya informs him, for what is probably the hundredth time they have had this particular little conversation. Hanzo sighs aggressively loud - actually, no, scratch that, it’s just aggressive aggressively loud, and finally - after the hundredth time they’ve had this conversation, Satya actually seems to get it.

“...Ah,” she says, with growing awareness, “I am getting distracted again, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are, Ms. Vaswani,” he informs her, resisting the urge to snap at her.

He’s trying this new...patience thing out.

The very act of trying it is testing his patience.

Inside him, wrapped around his heart, Ao and Sora stir slightly at his anger. When the rage dies down, they put their heads back down, content to keep resting until their master calls them.

“My apologies,” Satya states to him, starting up the path to follow him to the edges of the cobbles, “These SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 units are in very good condition considering the time that they have spent exposed to the weather.”

Hanzo does not remember “dead” and “broken” being equivalent to “very good conditions,” but he supposes that’s something he personally does not get.

They head up the path in silence - Hanzo sullen and trying his hardest to remember to breathe, to remember his meditations, Satya continuing to glance at every cobble, every broken Omnic, every piece of concrete - as the dirt of the path gives way to rough cobble paving and the road widens to the remains of what was once a true street. They round the last set of trees and -

Hanzo is caught off-guard by the suddenness of its existence.

Buildings - tall and upright - stand like solemn statues, their bright paint faded and peeling, moss and weeds growing off of them in excess. Bastion units, long dead and broken and apparently in “very good condition” lie strewn about, rotting away as the forest reclaims their bones with more difficulty than the buildings. Fluffy, white clouds shift against the blue sky overhead, the wind rustling the trees, the leaves, and the overgrowth on the old, crumbling buildings and Bastions.

It is...beautiful, in a hallowed way.

Inside him, Ao and Sora lift their heads. Dragons of the East possess immensely close ties to nature, to sacred places, to battlefields and graveyards, to the closeness of the spirits as they drift upon the winds.

The mere brush of the holy atmosphere of the forgotten town against him sends them sparking with lightning.

Hanzo feels it prickle at his skin like static.

Settle down, he tells them, and inside him, Ao shifts his gaze, growling out, We grow tired of being kept in here, Hanzo.
We need freedom sometimes, Sora adds on, and Hanzo mentally pats both of them on their heads, saying, Later. You will only confuse her. And we do not need to be even more delayed.

I do not understand this rush, Sora sighs, dropping his head onto his foreclaws and Ao rubs comfortably against Hanzo’s hand.

We must return before it gets too dark to find our way out of the forest, Hanzo explains, Who knows how long it will take her to “measure” the armor, and I do not relish the idea of spending the night in the Black Forest with Vishkar’s most notorious architect.

I do not see what is so bad about her, Ao comments, flicking his tail, and Sora huffs with a grumbling “laugh,” She reminds me of you, Hanzo.

Do not insult me like this, Hanzo snaps at the younger twin and Sora rolls his head uncaringly.

“How fascinating,” Satya says beside him in the real world, “I expected more overgrowth, actually. It is remarkable that the town is still in such good condition.”

Again with the “good conditions.”

She tests his patience.

Hanzo makes a face instead of a remark, biting his tongue. He sighs, once more resuming his pace up the road and after a beat, Satya follows him. There are signs of old history, more recent technologies, and even more modern hallmarks - the old stone buildings, their cold, rock guts falling apart, stand as a testament to Germany’s medieval period; the lampposts and electrical poles pointing to the 20th century, to when humans began utilizing the power of the current in new and unprecedented ways.

And the Bastion and Spider units, rotting in the places of their deaths.

A grim reminder of what had been lost here, only thirty years ago.

The trees, the moss, the ivy, growing in the cracks of history.

A reminder that nothing is truly eternal, even history.

Satya inspects the Spider unit lying in the middle of the street, until Hanzo “ahems” her and she follows after him, but not before giving the Spider unit a longing, wistful glance. They continue up the winding street, passing forgotten pubs, an old music shop, and the cobbled road gives way to a more modernized one - a paved concrete street with stripes for autos - another relic of a bygone age, and they cross under a small pedestrian bridge towards the old town square.

The dim, mournful silence is peaceful in a way -

“Why did you leave your clan?” Satya asks him suddenly, and Hanzo scowls at the invasiveness of the question, before muttering, “Why do you care?”

“The yakuza are among the most powerful organizations in Japan - they were influential before the Crisis, but after the Crisis they effectively ruled the country, until Overwatch came in and removed the majority from power. And yet your family remained.” Satya tilts her head at him in mild, discomforting confusion, “I do not understand why you would leave.”

They trudge towards the first roadblock, the gate of the castle’s outer, curtain walls, and pass into the small defense hallways of the gatehouse to get through it.
“...I do not wish to explain myself to you,” Hanzo states back just as bluntly as she asked and she...frowns, not understanding, “I do not see what you can gain from leaving your organization.”

“Then you will never be able to understand why I left,” Hanzo replies simply, before -

The castle of Eichenwalde stands tall before them, and Hanzo pauses to admire its rustic beauty. Satya follows his gaze up, her screenglass visor flashing something briefly. Even here, with the main gate closed, Bastions and Spiders crumble away - Hanzo had never fully realized how...horrific this battle must have been for the Crusaders positioned here, to know that even with ancient ground defenses and walls of stone, nothing but death could stop the Omnic’s march.

Satya taps at the Spider unit closest to them, but she continues to frown, answering slowly, “I do not like not understanding something. Everything has an answer. Everything can be solved.”

“Hmm, not everything,” Hanzo snorts with derision and Satya shakes her head, mumbling, “How will I sleep over this?”

“I lose sleep over the same matter every day,” Hanzo says sarcastically, starting up the street that winds to their left, but his arrow of wit completely misses his mark - just whizzes over her head in the worst shot he’s ever taken in his life.

“Then we will have to work on finding a solution to this problem,” Satya states clearly and boldly as she taps along behind him, and Hanzo wonders if all Vishkar architects are this bad at being around other human beings or if their brains have all just turned to light displays in their heads.

“And what of you?” Hanzo asks, trying to get a grip on the situation again before his mind turns to hard light mush too, “Why are you - Vishkar’s top architect - out here in the middle of the Black Forest of Germany?”

“We are here to copy Balderich von Alder’s armor,” Satya replies as if it were the most obvious statement in the world, “You were already informed of this.”

“That is not what I am asking,” Hanzo huffs, pausing at the curve there, right before the road begins a slight incline under an defensive arch, folding his arms across his chest.

“What are you asking then?” Satya questions him curiously, “Because that is what it sounds like to me.”

“I am asking why you, Satya Vaswani, are out here - not with Vishkar security or even Helix Security, but with an illegal mercenary, walking to Eichenwalde Castle, to copy an old Crusader’s armor that has been sitting here for years,” Hanzo states as clearly and as simply as his grasp of English will allow, and Satya’s eyebrows dip at that, as she mulls the question over before replying, “I am here because I was told to come here.”

“...By Vishkar or someone in Vishkar?”

“I do not understand this question - are they not the same answer?”

“No, a group and someone within a group are two completely different beings,” Hanzo attempts to explain to her, and Satya shakes her head slowly, “They are not.”

“I spent my entire life in a yakuza clan - these two things are very different from one another,” Hanzo grits his teeth. Satya continues to shake her head, saying, “No, they are the same.”

“Ms. Vaswani -”
“Are your body and the cells in your body different or the same?”

And now it is Hanzo’s turn to be confused: “What?”

Satya sighs, saying in that patronizing, calm, high tone of hers, “The cells of an organism may be different from one another, but they all have their place - they all work together to both be the organism and benefit the organism. They are one and the same. You may distinguish skin cells from blood cells from bone cells, but everything is in order, and everything contributes together to become the higher organism.”

Hanzo is quiet, contemplating her words as she finishes, “This is Vishkar’s vision: a world where all the people work to benefit the higher organism - the world itself - where humanity is as one collection, one being against disorder and anarchy, so that we may all build a better future together. And so, this is why I am here. To do what the organization tells me.”

Hanzo loses his patience.

“...So since you do not truly understand what I am asking,” Hanzo sighs, “Let me try one more time:

“Was it Vishkar who asked you to be in the slums of Rio de Janeiro on the day the Calado Corporation blew up six months ago, or was it someone within Vishkar who asked you, personally, all on their own, to be there?”

Satya stops in her tracks, just a little ways up the incline from him, glares at him fiercely, before stating coldly, “...They are the same.”

So someone within Vishkar asked her to be there all on their own, Hanzo assesses, Or perhaps a subgroup within Vishkar vying for control.

He had seen it all the time in the Shimada gumi - shifting alliances between family members and sub-clan leaders, high-stakes missions to oust or remove rivals from positions of power, pushing boundaries and limits of control to see what they could get away with.

And bombings.

Yes, the clan had no qualms about bombling each other when they needed to.

“...And was it Vishkar who asked you to come out here, with a black market mercenary, whom you have never met before but know is an ex-yakuza assassin, to enter a country where neither of us speak the main language, to sneak into a forest, to break into a forgotten castle, to copy one of the most powerful armors humankind has ever made,” Hanzo snaps, glaring back just as sharply, “...Or was it someone within Vishkar who asked you to do this with no other involvement from anyone else in the company?”

“...Sanjay is Vishkar, as am I, as are all within Vishkar,” her voice is like shards of ice assembling themselves into snowflakes, snapping together into perfect repeating fractals that build upon themselves, perfectly aligned.

Perfectly symmetrical.

“...So his name is Sanjay,” Hanzo says coolly, trying to back off now that he got the information he wanted, but suddenly

She looks briefly troubled, a wrinkle of confusion appearing on her face, and she says, “You are mistaken.”
“Oh, no, I have found the answer I was looking for -” Hanzo starts, but Satya just continues with that strange, eerie tone of… concern in her voice, “Sanjay does not ask me anything. No one in Vishkar asks me to do anything.

“They tell me to do things. They do not ask.”

Satya’s perfect face is marred with frustration and Hanzo

His patience is lost but,

His tired, weary sympathy is restored.

He feels for her.

“…You are correct - I was mistaken,” Hanzo says thoughtfully and she scowls at him, still frustrated and confused and pained by the difficulty of attempting to understand why it frustrates and confuses her so much. Hanzo nods at her respectfully:

“Perhaps someday…you will understand why I left the Shimada clan.”

Satya looks at him with a hard, struggling stare when -

Something large and looming and huge - did Hanzo mention that it is BIG - emerges from the left, from underneath the castle’s arch behind her, and it stomps loud and obnoxiously and HUGE, it is MASSIVE - well over two meters tall -

Hanzo does not think -

*You were not trained to think*, his father’s hard, cold voice rings in his heart -

The stormbow is in his right hand and the arrow is in his left -

*You were trained to obey* -

His hands are notching the arrow, as he shouts, “Ms. Vaswani! Get behind me -”

*You were trained to act* -

A different look of confusion blooms on her dark, elegant face and Satya is twirling around as the large, huge, massive, big figure raises its arms -

“AHAHA, I TOLD YOU I KNEW WHERE ZE SECRET PASSAGE WAS!”

*You will not hesit-*

Hanzo hesitates.

Two more figures emerge seemingly from the wall - one is more normal, human-sized and the other -

Satya gasps, as Hanzo feels the lightning crackle against his skin -

A Bastion unit walks into the sunlight.

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When I think of you
Your name's in the sky
Ninety feet high

Contact

Riding on our shiny metal horses
Singing a rider's song
One of us will be forgotten
The other will be wrong

Two, four, one, ten
Two, four, one, ten

Am I still willing
To foot all this billing?

Contact

Chapter End Notes

Okay, but like...are people just NOT shocked that a Bastion is still up and walking around? Because in-game everyone is just so casual about seeing Bastion for the first time like, "Oh, I thought we killed all those things and then killed them again when Null Sector revived them? All well."

And yes, this was written before the Bastion comic came out. However, I still have some plans to incorporate that. A certain Swedish engineering getting some of the spotlight is very important to me.

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Next week: there are a few more oddly coincidental chance encounters in Eichenwalde.
You might say it's a perfect day for some...mayhem.

[Traveling to Eichenwalde]
Overwatch: Eichenwalde - Prepare Your Defense

Chapter Summary

The heir and the creator meet up with the knight, the squire, and the sentry.

They are joined by a ghost of a sniper.

On the other side of the gate, a survivor and scrapper..."assist" the United European Defense squadron in entering the center of Eichenwalde.

And when they all come together -

A storm begins to brew.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to sound like a broken record, but THANK YOU all for the comments and compliments. ;_; I seriously appreciate them so much. I finally have time this weekend to go through and respond to people.

I'm SO HYPED because we're finally HERE - I love and hate the Eichenwalde map so much.

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Song is "Geronimo" by Sheppard ([Youtobe](https://www.youtube.com)) (P.S. They're Australian)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Eichenwalde - Prepare Your Defenses

Can you feel it?

Now it's coming back

We can steal it.

If we bridge this gap,

I can see you

Through the curtains of the waterfall.

When I lost it,
Yeah, you held my hand,

But I tossed it,

Didn't understand,

You were waiting,

As I dove into the waterfall.

So say, “Geronimo!”

Say Geronimo!

Say Geronimo!

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Smed flashback: Building a Better Gun

August 3, 2048: 12:38 a.m. - Watchpoint: Montreal, Canada.

Despite the late (or rather early) hour, Torbjörn continues to tinker away at something. He’s not really sure what he’s making at the moment - half the time his craziest ideas come to him just when he’s fiddling around with scraps of metal and some nuts and bolts, or inputting commands into his small specialty engineering program on his datapad, letting the little AI generator help him organize potential codes to make some new weapon feasible. The other half of the time, he will actually force himself to sit down with blueprints and drafting paper and pencils of different sizes and colors.

That was important, the pencils. Torbjörn is particular about many things, but having his drafting supplies in order? That is the most important aspect of all.

Sometimes it feels like the two ways he conceives of new ideas are the two halves of the spirit of creation itself - at times orderly, organized, perfectly functional, things falling into step-by-step progress, ideas drafting themselves through different colored pencils onto paper and then into computer models and then into 3D printers; at other times messy, rough, chaotic, ideas flowing through him when he bangs two chunks of metal together or welds computer chips into things that don’t really need computer chips but the messy half of his creative brain thinks they could be improved with a computer chip - everything can be improved with a computer chip -

Except mechs.

Especially mechs.

Especially mechs with self-improving computer chips.

Especially mechs with self-improving sentient computer chips.
Torbjörn sighs with deep exhaustion.

He does not feel like he’s twenty-nine.

And he knows that he doesn’t really look it either. The rough combination of creative engineering genius, frequent sleepless nights, common headaches, large amounts of caffeine, achondroplasia, and overwhelming guilt have aged him. Even two years ago, before this whole shitshow of a war began, he found stress-bleached hairs from being overworked by the Guild. They were faint compared to his already faint blonde hair, but it was noticeable enough to Torb.

Small details like that always stick out to him.

Didn’t help that now he was surrounded by two tall, strapping American supersoldiers (both younger than him), a statuesque Egyptian cyborg sniper, and a fucking rocket-powered German giant.

Just Torbjörn’s luck to end up on the same team as some of the most conventionally attractive people in the world.

Torbjörn sighs with an even deeper exhaustion.

Because it was also just his luck that these people were amazing.

He had expected taunts, distance, possible looks of disgust at first, maybe even being ignored. “Normal” people act strange around people with his condition. “Normal” people act even stranger around creative geniuses. “Normal” people act the strangest around short creative geniuses who think about weapons all day.

Fortunately for Torbjörn, no one in Overwatch was “normal.”

They were all different levels of strange - Ana with her sniping and cybernetic eye obsessions, her constant thinking about positioning (not just hers, but all of theirs), her constant awareness of where everyone is, what they’re doing, what their next step should be, her constant focus on keeping them all safe, fighting off the dangers of the world with the crack of a rifle and a single bullet; Reinhardt with his lionhearted fury and lust for battle, his borderline arsonistic interest in making everything on and around him rocket-powered, and his borderline suicidal need to protect them all, to the point of bodily defending them when his shield cracks and breaks; Jack with his ability to organize them all, his ability to translate their commander’s semi-inane battle plans into real, workable strategies, his ability to be a soldier and a healer and an anchor for them to rally their differences around, a guiding force that pieces together their brilliant uniquenesses and make them into something stronger, bolder, better; and Gabriel with his laser-sighted focus on how to break a battle, his astounding, raw, terrible, brilliant ideas at turning tricks into tactics, at seeing their stronger, bolder, better togetherness and turning their team into an unstoppable force for the good of all, his vicious, vibrant ability of destroying destruction itself, of stopping death with death.

Yes, Torbjörn was overwhelmingly grateful that they were all strange -

And that their abnormalities meshed together perfectly -

Like cogs in a machine.

He had friends in the Guild, and he had even had friends growing up -

But it was the first time he’d truly felt like he had a team

And a family.
A family who never looked at him sideways, a family who never questioned the strangeness of his creative genius, a family who laughed at bad jokes and who played terrible games together and who shared their strange habits for the good of all.

They may not cure his sleepless nights, nor his crippling addiction to caffeine, nor stop the pounding of his headaches, nor absolve the overwhelming guilt, but sometimes -

They make him feel a little taller -

They help him stand a little straighter -

They make him feel content with being strange.

The soft clanking of metal on metal grinds with the movement of his thoughts, and prevents him from hearing the -

“Oh shit, good, you’re awake.”

Torb glances up. He’s sitting on one of the couches that form three parts of a square around a cheap squared coffee table in the main breakroom of Watchpoint: Montreal, their main headquarters. He’s kept the lighting low as to not disturb the others whose rooms are just down the hall, opting for his small drafting table light instead (he’s got four of them scattered around the base), casting just enough concentrated glow for him to see the bits and pieces he’s got splayed across the table. The room is furnished rather sparsely - none of them blame the U.N. for giving them the barest of comforts, and all of them would rather see money go into supplies or ammunition - but after about a year of moving in and out of this base, it’s finally starting to look more lived in: extra fleece blankets lying in unfolded piles on the couches, Gabriel’s guitar case up against the wall, some gaming system connected to the giant screen, one of Ana’s extra berets sitting on a side table, Reinhardt’s giant, oversized mug accidentally left out next to it, the usual.

Torbjörn looks up to where Gabriel is descending the metal staircase from the upper hall, yawning slightly, his black beanie sitting slightly askew on his shaved hair, as if he’d pulled it on in haste, wearing mismatched socks, his sweatpants and jacket two slightly different shades of grey. The engineer follows his commander’s exhausted form with a slightly skeptical eye, and Gabriel hops over the back of the couch with practiced ease and seats himself by Torbjörn.

“You look like shit,” Torbjörn mutters to him fondly and Gabriel says dryly, “Tell me something I don’t know. You doin’ something important?”

“Just waitin’ fer inspiration to strike,” the engineer sighs as the commander shivers and grabs one of the nearby blankets, wrapping it around his legs with a miserable pout on his face.

“Ah, weakling,” Torbjörn chuckles at him and Gabriel gives him a fierce, intimidating glare, muttering, “It’s so fucking cold here.”

“This is why they should never have put a Californian in charge,” Torb retorts, “You could be incapacitated by a snowflake.”

“We get snow in California,” Gabriel huffs, but relents when Torbjörn gives him a skeptical stare, admitting, “...Just not where I’m from.”

“Fucking Los Angeles, I know, we all know.”

Gabriel eyes him suspiciously before Torbjörn sighs more sympathetically, “So what’re ya doin’ up, vän? Having problems sleeping?”
“Yeah, Jack’s snoring is killing me,” the twenty-seven year old chuckles darkly, but adds with more consideration, “…I had an idea.”

Torbjörn snorts as he snaps two pieces of metal together. “Of course you did,” he says, picking up his small welder and flicking the heat on.

“I just want to know what you think of it,” Gabriel mutters, absently watching Torbjörn putter with the scraps as he yawns, “Or if you even think it’s possible.”

“Nearly everything is possible,” Torbjörn states impassively, “The difference between impossibility and possibility is the method of achieving. Making hover cars fly from anti-gravity is nearly impossible, but making them fly from low levels of fusion propulsion? More than possible.”

Gabriel considers his words for a long, quiet moment, before stuffing a hand into one of his jacket pockets and pulling out a small, tattered notebook with a pen. He flips to a page and reads to Torbjörn:

“A tactical pattern-recognition program for turret auto-aiming on hostiles.”

The words make Torbjörn stop his tinkering -

As the idea rushes into his head in a messy, rough, chaotic flow:

Advanced, multi-pattern-recognition IFF-tracking algorithms, synchronized by a single operative, autonomous program -

To distinguish members of his team -

His family -

From the hordes of enemies threatening to destroy them.

“Tried me like twenty minutes to figure out the right words,” Gabriel mutters, “I can get all sorts of ideas but it takes me fucking forever to get the right way to say them.” The commander leans forward a little, propping his elbows on his thighs and interlacing his fingers together as he continues:

“Basically, my idea is like - your turrets do a lot of work, fucking great work - we’ve managed to win so many battles thanks to you putting them in choke points and effectively making fucking walls of death where we need them - but their ability to recognize enemies is currently limited to infrared and motion sensing, right? If we want them directed a certain way - like, away from shooting down Jack when the dumbass rushes ahead - you have to physically be there to turn them.”

“…True,” Torbjörn mutters, his thoughts racing ahead far faster than his spoken words - they’re churning forward, surging out from internal colored pencils onto the mental draft pages of his mind, they’re tapping through his internal database of programming possibilities, grinding gears to crank out possible codes that could work, maybe, potentially, if they tweak them and modify them and rebuild them -

“So I was wondering,” Gabriel murmurs, “If we could just - like, push that ability to recognize enemies one step further. Because there’s gonna be a point where we’re in - I dunno, Siberia or something where infrared isn’t gonna cut it because the damn bots will be able to lower their core temperatures past ours, and then the turrets will be targeting us, right? And motion sensing is fine when the turrets are isolated and gunning down Bastions, but what if we need extra firepower like, right next to Reinhardt? Or around people? We’re gonna hit some point where it just won’t be quite enough -”
“What kind of patterns?” Torbjörn says, placing his metal pieces down and pulling out his engineering datapad - if they used multiple patterns, then the program could run down a gatekeeping, safeguard checklist, ensuring there are no accidents, each pattern would have to be recognized (or rather, not recognized) for the turret to fire. Gabriel scowls as the builder fires up the specialty program, and the commander says slowly, “Well - I dunno. You’re the one who’s way better at this than me but maybe like - if the turrets can distinguish between how a Bastion walks versus how a human walks, or like...if it can recognize if someone has that stupid Overwatch logo on them, or like...

“Voice-recognition,” Torbjörn says as the AI in the program pulls up voice-recognition coding, “Facial-recognition, walk patterns, height descriptions, blatant pattern recognition like the Overwatch symbol…”

Gabriel stares at him intensely before asking in low, dark, shifting tones: “Possible?”

“...More than possible, sir,” Torbjörn states confidently, already falling back into work mode, his creative thoughts running and churning and grinding together as piece after piece of possibilities fall into place, “If ya give me time, we may even be able to use biodata to get the program to build a virtual concept of allies in this recognition program - it could even be used to distinguish you from Jack, or Jack from Ana -”

Gabriel smirks as Torbjörn immediately starts flicking bits of code about in his engineering datapad, setting aside the ones that “could be possible” from the “could be impossible”. The engineer is beginning to ramble as the idea starts taking further shape in his head:

“We could potentially even include possible commands, so that we could even direct the turrets to prioritize certain actions or enemies over others. Maybe ya could say, ‘Turret A, focus on assisting Ana Amari,’ and then the turret could focus exclusively on targeting the enemies around her, we could position turrets behind Reinhardt’s shield with this, we could set them up on chokepoints and ya could lead enemies straight to them and not worry about being shot -”

Torbjörn’s eyes gleam in the dim lighting, and he flashes a wide grin at Gabriel, saying, “The possibilities are endless here. Bloody hell, we could probably even put a modified version of the program in Ana’s eye or yer’s and Jack’s eyeglasses.”

A dark focus dawns over Gabriel’s face but Torbjörn now scowls, “The problem - and there’s always a problem - is that I am not a biomedical expert. I am a weaponsmith. A slightly more advanced multi-pattern-recognition IFF-tracking program - I can do that no problem, but pulling, recording, databasing, and then analyzing biodata? Not my expertise, commander.”

Gabriel frowns before chuckling, “So you’re saying we’re gonna need to start recruiting?”

“At some point, yes,” Torbjörn mutters, looking to see the ways he can start compiling the code, “A more advanced pattern-recognition program should be enough to make the turrets auto-target hostiles only, but advancing to biodata? That will take more time.”

“...And an expert,” Gabriel says dryly and the engineer chuckles at that, “Yes. And an expert.”

“Well, it’s not like I have the time to look for new hires now,” Gabriel sighs, pulling the blanket off his legs and rising to his feet. He turns and steps on the couch seat and pops himself over the back, and Torb rolls his eyes at the fact that Gabriel Reyes - commander of the secret supra-national militarized task force team Overwatch, one of the greatest tacticians of the modern age, terrible and brilliant fighter - could not be arsed to walk around a series of couches like a normal person.
But then again -

None of them are “normal” people.

“Reyes,” Torbjörn says suddenly in the stillness of the night, and Gabriel looks at him from the foot of the stairs. The engineer nods affirmatively to his commander, saying, “Ya don’t always need the right words - you can share yer crazy ideas with me anytime. I will figure out the ways they can be possible.”

Gabriel gives him a look of stunned surprise and then grins at him wildly, brightly, saying, “Thanks, Torb. Don’t stay up too late.”

“Asshole - how can I go to sleep now that I have this crazy idea?”

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*Can you feel my love?*

*Bombs away, bombs away, bombs away.*

*Can you feel my love?*

*Bombs away, bombs away, bombs away,*

*Say Geronimo!*

*Well we rushed it,*

*Moving way too fast.*

*That we crushed it,*

*But it's in the past.*

*We can make this leap,*

*Through the curtains of the waterfall.*

*So say Geronimo!*

*Say Geronimo!*

*Say Geronimo!*

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相続人 (Sozokujin): Defend the Objective

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:00 p.m. - Defender’s side of the Castle Wall
Hanzo nearly fires his bow out of fear, but the large figure shouts down to them, “Oh! People! Hello!”

“...Hello,” Satya says rather timidly and Hanzo -

“Why are you talking to them??” Hanzo shouts at her, and Satya glances back to him, muttering, “I was told not greeting others back was rude.”

“You do not even know who they are!” Hanzo snaps, his arrow never leaving the Bastion unit’s head, “What if they - They - THAT IS A BASTION, HOW.”

“Oh damn!” the normal human - a young woman with long, brown hair and a smattering of freckles across her face snaps as she too steps into the sunlight. She’s got some lightweight body armor on, and is hauling some sort of heavy case across her back, but she somehow nimbly steps in front of the Bastion unit, spreading her arms wide, shouting, “Do not shoot it!”

...She’s technically not blocking his head, Sora notes and Ao mutters, I have never eaten a Bastion before.

THEY ARE ALL SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD, THAT IS WHY YOU HAVE NOT EATEN ONE, Hanzo screams, losing his shit and Sora rumbles with dragon laughter as Ao snorts, It has not killed you or them yet -

The Bastion unit lifts its hand and waves at them, giving a loud BEEP, and the huge figure besides them steps out from under the shadows of the arch and -

Hanzo nearly drops his bow out of pure shock -

A living Crusader stands there, dressed in full barrier armor, sans only his helmet.

The last living Crusader, and what may be the last living Bastion -

Standing side by side

...Not killing each other.

“Oh,” says Satya with mild surprise and Hanzo thinks he might finally be losing his grip on reality because he’s in some weird, sacred, hallowed forgotten town in a magical forest where dead humans and dead Omnic's are coming back to life and -

Somehow

Somehow

Satya Vaswani hardly seems perturbed by it.

Hanzo flicks his gaze between the Bastion and the Crusader, and he takes in the man’s unruly white hair and beard, his large blue eye, the massive scar over the other -

HOLY SHIT

Reinhardt Wilhelm in the flesh and armor.

Hanzo slowly lowers his bow, but he does not return the arrow to the quiver. Satya begins walking
towards them and Hanzo hisses, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING.”

“It is rude not to greet them -”

“ARE YOU INSANE.”

“HELLO ZHERE,” Reinhardt booms at them and both Satya and Hanzo flinch back at the sheer volume and magnitude of his voice. The woman waves at them but does not move from her defensive position in front of the Bastion, and once the ringing in his ears stop, Hanzo gestures at the Bastion with the storm bow, snapping, “What is that THING doing?? How is it ALIVE??”

“Oh,” Reinhardt states, before saying loudly, “WE DO NOT KNOW.”

“AND YOU JUST LET IT COME HERE?? WITH YOU?? OF ALL PEOPLE??”

“...It took some persuasion,” the woman says dryly and Reinhardt laughs voluminously. Satya frowns at Hanzo, muttering quietly, “I do not much like loud noises.”

Hanzo gets that much, at least.

“Do you even know who that is?” Hanzo gasps at her, gesturing to Reinhardt and Satya nods, “That is Reinhardt Wilhelm, the last living German supersoldier Crusader, a founding member of Overwatch, and apparently a friend to a living SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 unit.”

Satya begins walking towards them again and Hanzo rushes after her, gripping at her arm, saying desperately, “PLEASE stop putting yourself in danger -”

“We are not in danger -”

“That thing is designed to KILL people - and it is in EXTREMELY good condition,” Hanzo hisses, attempting to use terminology she might understand and Satya nods again, “Exactly. That is why we must take measurements immediately.”

“MS. VASWANI NO -”

“It will not hurt you!” the woman tells them and both Satya and Hanzo look at her. She lowers her arms, twiddling her thumbs, saying, “It has not hurt anything the whole way here. It is even friends with a bird. It has not tried anything with us. We just needed tis help getting here. Do not hurt it.”

Hanzo openly gawks at her, before asking, “Who are you?”

“I am Brigitte - I blacksmith for Rein,” the woman says with a sigh, “I am Torbjörn Lindholm’s last apprentice...and his youngest daughter.”

“If that thing hasn’t hurt you, then why are you in full armor?”

“PRECAUTIONS, FRIEND,” Reinhardt yells at them and Hanzo feels like the wind of his words is going to knock him sideways, “One can never be too careful! But it seems zhey were not necessary, haha! Look, we made et here in record time!”

“...We were lost in the forest for two days, Rein,” Brigitte groans, “That is NOT record time.”

“...Se-mantics,” Reinhardt states with wave of his massive hand, before looking back at the two of them, saying, “But where are my manners! Who are you, friends?”

OH SHIT, SATYA NO
“I am Satya Vaswani,” Satya says to him as casually as if they were meeting in a cafe or on the bus or something, and Hanzo feels something inside him shrivel up into a corner and -

“And this is Hanzo Shimada.”

Yup, it definitely curls up into a ball and dies.

Reinhardt’s good eye flicks over Hanzo, assessing him, taking in the Japanese archery outfit, the clawed boots, the storm bow, before his gaze levels with Hanzo -

The jovial nature is gone...or at least severely dampened.

“...Ees zhat so?” Reinhardt asks slowly, more hypothetical than anything else and Brigitte looks between the two men slowly, saying, “Does that name mean what I think it does, Rein?”

It is time to just be honest.

“If you worked for Overwatch, then you must know that Overwatch had some...dealings with the Shimada yakuza group,” Hanzo says stiffly, before adding with a little more venom, “More specifically, Blackwatch took a good deal of action against my clan.”

“Ah,” Brigitte says, also with a strangely cautious tone, as Reinhardt nods, but that frown never leaves his face.

“...Indeed,” Reinhardt says in a surprisingly low voice for the man, before snapping at Hanzo, “You are quite a long ways from Japan, Meester Shimada.”

_End me_, Hanzo thinks, wishing he could die of embarrassment, but then he would have died years ago and would never have had to come to this place and live out this weird fever dream.

That sounds nice.

“...I no longer work for the clan,” Hanzo tells him truthfully, before gesturing to Satya, “As you can see, I am doing...freelance work.”

Reinhardt looks at her, assessing her just as he did with Hanzo, and Hanzo notices how his eye lingers over her construct arm for a long moment before asking her, “Es zhat a Vishkar arm?”

“It is indeed,” Satya replies to him serenely, and Brigitte scowls, asking, “What is a Vishkar architech doing out here?”

_OH SHIT, SATYA NO - oh, I give up._

“I am here to assess Eichenwalde and copy Balderich von Alder’s armor,” Satya just...tells them, like it’s the easiest thing to say in the world, and Hanzo sighs, muttering, “Do you ever just...stop to think about what you say?”


“With hard light technology,” Satya informs him, but then she gestures to the Bastion, adding, “If it is possible, I would like to take the SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 unit’s measurements as well.”

“I mean...I guess that’s up to it?” Brigitte says with slight confusion and the Bastion unit bweeps at them confusedly. Brigitte turns to it, saying, “No, she wants to...measure you. Measurement
is...hard to explain.”

“I would also like to take Mr. Wilhelm’s armors’ dimensions as well.”

The atmosphere gets very, very still at her words.

Reinhardt and Hanzo both stare at the small Swedish blacksmith.

Brigitte turns back to Satya slowly, saying darkly, “No.”

“...Please?” Satya asks, and Brigitte folds her arms, repeating sternly, “NO.”

Satya shrugs to herself and asks the Bastion, “May I measure you?”

The Bastion -

The Bastion mimics her shrugging motion.

Hanzo thinks his jaw drops.

“Is that a yes?” Satya asks Brigitte and Brigitte’s glare slides off her face with a sigh and mumbles, “I suppose so? Just be careful approaching it.”

“Thank you,” Satya says politely, slowly walking up to the Bastion. It tilts its head at her curiously as she approaches, and Hanzo follows behind her after readying his bow once again, aiming for the Bastion unit’s head. Reinhardt’s good eye never leaves her, except only to flick to Hanzo once, and then back to Satya.

Clearly he is...less concerned about the Bastion’s safety than his blacksmith.

Hanzo keeps his eyes on the Bastion, but with his peripherals, he notes the massive, rocket hammer resting at Reinhardt’s side. Satya gingerly steps up to the Bastion unit, before smiling at it with surprising grace and ease, saying, “You are quite remarkable.”

All of them - including the Bastion - gawk at her in confusion.

“How did you survive? Are your fusion cells not running low?” Satya asks it, never minding that she does not receive any answer she can understand, although the Bastion bweeps at her softly. She pats its hand with her normal one as the compact hand reaches out and begins weaving soft forms of blue light over its gun arm. The Bastion unit watches her thoughtfully as a small, bright yellow bird settles on its shoulder.

The four of them follow her in stunned silence as Satya hums a tune to herself, pleasantly going about, drawing shapes with the hard light technology, moving with a slow, graceful rhythm to her song.

“...Why does Vishkar want to copy Balderich’s armor?” Brigitte asks her coldly and Satya just hums out, “I do not know.”

“...You did not ask why Vishkar sent an architect out to Eichenwalde in the middle of the Black Forest for...armor?” Brigitte says, attempting to clarify, but Hanzo just coughs, “Do not ask.”

Brigitte gives him a quizzical look and Hanzo shrugs a little, though the aim of his arrow never leaves the Bastion’s head, “We were just going over this when you...arrived? ...How did you even get in here?”
“There is a secret passage into the castle walls from outside in the forest,” Brigitte explains before gesturing to Reinhardt, “He remembered where it was.”

“Stealth is a very good tactic,” says the world’s least stealthy man proudly, “Gabriel taught me everything he knew!”

Brigitte rolls her eyes at that, but some of her dark mood lightens at Reinhardt’s words - even a faint smile cracks out on her lips.

Hanzo is beginning to realize why she probably tags along on the old Crusader’s crazy adventures.

“You would have been the **worst** Blackwatch agent in the world,” Brigitte says to him and Reinhardt cackles, “Maybe, maybe not! Ze world will never know, my friend! Eet remains a mystery!”

Suddenly, Hanzo hears -

Hanzo hears the soft pattering of feet behind them and he jerks his arrow’s aim around to the street, twisting to follow it -

A small cloaked figured in a black and blue electronic screenglass facemask - holding a long, thin sniper rifle - is rushing up the incline at them -

“HOSTILE,” Hanzo shouts and the Bastion bweeps loudly, swiveling towards the street as Reinhardt roars something incoherent and Brigitte is grabbing a small shotgun from a side holster and -

Even though they are still rushing towards them, the gunman immediately throws their arms wide, their long biotic rifle held upright, hand on the barrel away from the trigger, weapon parallel to themselves, away from any possible shooting position and Hanzo hesitates momentarily at the wide, **open** display of vulnerability -

With their free hand, the gunman makes a frantic, open-palmed gesture, waving at them *in sheer panic* - a universal symbol for “don’t shoot” before pointing rapidly down the road towards the Castle’s enceinte gate and -

An explosion rocks out from where the gate is -

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*Can you feel my love?*

*Bombs away, bombs away, bombs away.*

*Can you feel my love?*

*Bombs away, bombs away, bombs away.*

*Well I'm just a boy,*

*With a broken toy,*

*All lost and coy,*
At the curtains of the waterfall.

So it's here I stand,

As a broken man,

But I've found my friend,

At the curtains of the waterfall.

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**Shabkh**: Objective Unknown

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 11:58 a.m. - outskirts of Eichenwalde

For what feels like the thousandth time, Ana sighs inside her mask.

How had this happened?

How had she let things get this bad?
How had she let them get this *far??*

It had been embarrassing enough to let them get out of Egypt, let alone the Middle East, let alone get all the way to southern Germany without Ana catching them, but this was a new level of low for her. They weren’t even hard targets to *hit*, they were just *aggravating* to try and get properly separated from one another.

Bloody hell, at this point she didn’t even want the bounty on them.

She just wanted to get back the items they stole.

*Another month of being broke and living off rations and canned food,* she sighs once again, slipping silently among the trees, following the small...brigade of people as they stomp noisily through the forest. They’re struggling to heave something along - some giant...metal-encased pole thing, running it on a hover carrier as the wheels struggle to adapt to the rugged terrain and uneven path.

Her targets, as per usual - because at this point she has become very aware, and very *frustrated* with their habits - are ambling alongside the more...professional looking group of soldiers, the thinner one jabbering away at uncaring volumes.

“And then - and then Oi said, ‘Oy, if ya can’t handle the heat, ya ought to stay off the barbie, mate!’” the tall, spindly man with semi-smoking hair emphasizes loudly, smacking his metal hand into the palm of his flesh one, and he wiggles his peg leg to...add...extra (?) emphasis. Ana ducks behind the wide trunk of a tree, watching the group of United European Defense members gasp and moan as they pushed the back left hover wheel over a rock.

*Idiots,* Ana thinks. *Hover carriers had been invented *precisely* for this reason - they were extremely versatile, adaptable to almost any terrain, but they had a “low energy output” mode designed to help maximize fusion propulsion efficiency when the hover carrier was moving around on a flatter surface, but restoring it to its regular “all-terrain mode” was as simple as flipping a switch.*
...Never send the rookies to do the experienced job, Ana tisks at them, repressing the fact that she is out here - in the middle of the Black Forest in southern Germany - hundreds of kilometers away from her regular region of operations -

All to track down two morons that she could not seem to tranquilize at the same time.

“...Could you,” the ‘leader’ of the United European Defense squad huffs to the massive hog of a man walking slowly besides them.

“- And that woz when I chucked a rip-tire straight at ‘em!”

“ - Could you maybe help?” the leader snaps to the giant and the heavyset man in the weird pig-face gas mask rolls his shoulders apathetically, heaving, “You...You’re almost there.”

“We could - get there faster - if you two,” the leader seethes as the hover carrier bumps against a pile of cobble rubble and knocks it over, “If you two actually helped.”

“You have...a whole ‘nother squadron...five minutes behind you,” the pigmask man - Mako Rutledge or Roadhog, as his wanted poster called him, breathes at the United European Defense leader, and the thin, burning one - Jamison Fawkes or Junkrat, also the moniker used by his wanted poster - shouts with joy, “And then that blew all o’ them straight ta the moon!”

“Just wait for them,” Roadhog sighs into the thickness of his gasmask and the leader huffs, “You’re like three-hundred pounds!”

Ana rolls her eyes.

She’s seen this conversation go down a few times already - once in Istanbul, once in Vienna, and once in Barcelona.

...It never goes well.

“...You wanna fuckin’ GO, mate?” Roadhog shouts at the leader, throwing his arms out wide and the leader falls back against the hover carrier, stammering, “No - wait, that is NOT what I meant - just that you’re three-hundred pounds of muscle, yeah, pure muscle - you could definitely move this thing faster!”

“...You drongos know thot thing’s got a mode-switch, roight?” Junkrat says to them with sudden, vivid clarity as Roadhog growls at the leader one last time, cracking his knuckles with massive emphasis.

Ana takes that as her cue to leave.

She darts deeper into the woods, flanking down the side of the town’s steepening cliffs, glancing at the ground, looking for the particular spot -

It had been years - probably decades - since she had last been out to Eichenwalde with Reinhardt, but she had trained herself to remember key locations everywhere she went.

Plus, it was hard to forget something as badass as a medieval secret passage to a German castle, straight out of a fairy tale.

Suddenly, there’s lots of clanking noises and Ana skids to a stop, darting behind a tree as three figures - two massive and covered in metal, and one much smaller, closer to her height, rush past her and -
Even behind the Shrike screenglass, her good eye can process that tall, valiant figure anywhere.

Anytime.

“ZEES WAY,” Reinhardt bellows and the two others - a shorter, nimble woman covered in light body armor - Brigitte, Ana just barely recognizes her as she blurs past - and a -

Ana nearly screams -

A bloody BASTION unit is running with them.

ونار أسود! (tn: “oh black day! Oh black sooty day!”)

Or as Gabriel would put it:

WHAT IN THE FUCKING HELL.

Ana whips around the tree, snapping the zoom on the sniper rifle and aiming for the Bastion’s head when Reinhardt roars victoriously, “Here it is, friends!”

...Friends?

Ana does not lower the sniper rifle, nor defocus the zoom, but she does not pull the trigger, as much as every old instinct and old habit in her screams to do so. She watches silently, breathlessly, as Reinhardt physically pushes a massive boulder to the side and opens up the dark tunnel -

Oh.

She had not even thought about what she would do if the tunnel was blocked off.

...She really is losing her touch.

The Bastion unit has yet to...really do anything - it just beeps loudly with...apparent joy as Brigitte claps her hands delightfully and the three of them disappear into the darkness of the tunnel together.

Ana cocks her head, finally letting the sniper rifle rest in her hands, easing up from her crouching position slightly.

These are not the circumstances she predicted she’d reunite with Reinhardt under - if she would ever let herself reunite with him.

She still does not feel...ready.

She still does not feel...worthy.

The scarred, torn remnants of her right eyelid twitch and flutter at the thought of her failures.

She is not certain she would ever feel worthy of him again.

But at the same time -

These are precisely the circumstances she has been fearing for the last six years.

That the cruelties and dangers of the world - however slow-moving and creeping and...rather nonsensical they could be - would push past her line of defense -

And reach those she held most dear.
And that her failures - her failure to pull the trigger, her failure to act, her failure to stop them - could catch up to the ones she continued to protect, and consume them.

Even if she was not worthy of them -

Even if she was not worthy of their bravery, or their shields, or their great, booming, happy laughter, or wide, beaming smiles that remind her of home.

Ana scowls to herself, staring at the hollow of the tunnel, tapping a finger along her sniper rifle, thinking hard, lost in the war in her heart and the war in her head.

She does not really know if she is ready for this -

But all she knows -

All she does feel -

Is that - ready or not, worthy or not - the fight is coming to claim him, and the blacksmith with him, and even - maybe - a living Bastion.

And feeling worthless means nothing in the face of that.

Ana closes her good eye, inhales-exhales, and then snaps her eye open and darts the last few meters to the tunnel entrance. At the base of it, she settles her rifle back against her shoulder and peers into the cool darkness, chilled by the stones despite the summer heat. She checks her angles - no one there - and then eases her way into the tunnel, heading to the cobble stairs on the right.

Just because she was not ready or worthy for this moment does not mean she should rush.

No use in being hasty.

After all -

Haste and rush and arrogance and fear had only put her in this position in the first place.

Both with the Junkers

And with Amélie.

Ana quiets her footsteps as much as she can, stepping slowly and nearly-silently up the stairs. She rounds a corner and her small staircase connects to a number of other halls and tunnels - all subterranean still, based on both the sounds and the temperature down here. She’s not sure she entirely remembers which path is the one that will take her to the surface the most efficiently, but then -

“AHAHA, I TOLD YOU I KNEW WHERE ZE SECRET PASSAGE WAS!”

Booms out from above her - angled up and slightly to her left. However, the tunnel in that direction moves out far, far too much, perhaps to the other side of the castle bridge, so Ana decides to take the staircase to her right instead, winding up another floor, and this -

She pauses on the half-landing, as the conversations are now close enough to hear:

“THAT IS A BASTION, HOW,” an unfamiliar man’s voice calls out and Ana frowns to herself.

More people?
First the Junkers get hired by the United European Defensive Forces for... *something* -

And then Reinhardt, Brigitte and a fucking *living* Bastion -

And now more people?

What the *fuck* is going on with Eichenwalde today?

“Do not shoot him!” That one’s Brigitte - it’s been years since Ana’s last heard the young blacksmith’s voice, but she remembers her - more specifically, she remembers the pride in Torbjörn’s voice when he told her about how quickly Brigitte was learning, how wonderful her work was, how she showed such passion and enthusiasm for smithing -

And maybe -

Maybe Ana is not ready for or worthy of this -

But she feels a small burst of joy in her heart.

*You have kept my knight safe, my dear.*

Thank you.

There’s some lower levels of murmuring coming from above but then Reinhardt - ever impossibly loud - shouts, “HELLO ZHERE,” there is more “normal” levels of conversations followed by Reinhardt shouting again, “WE DO NOT KNOW.”

“AND YOU JUST LET IT COME HERE?? WITH YOU?? OF ALL PEOPLE??” the first man is saying now and Ana - Ana suspects they are still discussing the impossibility of a Bastion unit being alive. The conversation returns to more socially acceptable volumes and Ana…

She breathes a little easier.

Perhaps she won’t have to war between her heart and her head today.

She peeks her head above the landing, staring out into the mortared cobbled street, just long enough to see that there are four people - Reinhardt, Brigitte, a woman in a long blue dress (????), and an archer (???????) - and the Bastion, standing just a ways below the defensive arch over their heads. She ducks her head back down and stealthily crosses the landing, moving into another set of stairs running adjacent to them and slipping back into the subterranean hallways.

This one crosses to her left, running beneath the arch above to the defensive bailey tower and barracks just beside Eichenwalde Castle proper, and down straight, continuing towards the main enceinte Gate Wall and the remnants of the town beyond. Ana pauses just briefly to hear that the conversation is continuing, before moving down the straight hallway, up another set of stairs to pop out south of the small group.

Here, she gets a slightly better look at the other two people.

The woman moves in a soft, graceful pattern, her dark skin bright under the sun, long black hair shimmering like ink. Her dress - bright blue and surprisingly revealing - shifts as she moves closer to the Bastion and Ana’s eye picks out the startlingly white, mechanical arm on her right side.

Ana scowls and her right eyelid winces.

Vishkar?
Perhaps more unusual than the Vishkar architech though -

Is the archer.

He’s not terribly tall (though Ana supposes no one compares to Reinhardt, last of the German supersoldier Crusaders), but his dark hair is swept up into a high, short ponytail, long yellow ribbon trailing in the slight wind. He wears a short, possibly Japanese robe with only one sleeve on, his arms tense and pointing a notched arrow directly at the Bastion’s head.

More unusual than his weapon or his outfit though -

Is the tattoo.

It winds along his bare left arm, stormclouds and lightning strikes flashing against shimmering steely blue scales, wrapping around and around until it ends in a snarling dragon head at his wrist.

Ana’s good eye grows wide at that.

She’s only ever seen one tattoo of such a similar pattern, but with a jade green dragon and wind and water swirls, wrapping up the side of a ribcage -

On the torn, bleeding torso of a limp half-body being rushed to a transport ship by Jack and Gabriel, as Angela beside them screamed into her comms to her assistants back at the Tokyo safehouse to prepare for surgery -

As if on cue, the woman states calmly to the group - just barely loud enough for Ana to hear:

“I am Satya Vaswani. And this is Hanzo Shimada.”

Ana does not need to be ready or worthy for this moment to feel the tension that seizes Reinhardt’s body at the words, or how it seems to so perfectly parallel her own as her brain processes the names.

What in the actual FUCK is going on with Eichenwalde today??

“...Ees zhat so?” Reinhardt asks with the deadliness of a lion preparing to pounce and Brigitte - who is standing in front of the Bastion bodily blocking it from the other two, what is wrong with you, dear child?? - tilts her head a little to ask, “Does that name mean what I think it does, Rein?”

And much to Ana and Reinhardt’s surprise -

Hanzo speaks first:

“If you worked for Overwatch, then you must know that Overwatch had some...dealings with the Shimada yakuza group,” he says somewhat uncomfortably, before snapping, “More specifically, Blackwatch took a good deal of action against my clan.”

“Ah,” Brigitte says, and Ana can practically sense the image of Genji’s half-built cyborg body - a project Brigitte herself had helped Angela and Torbjörn work on - rolling around in the blacksmith’s head. Beside her, Reinhardt nods slowly.

“Indeed,” Reinhardt says to her in one of the most controlled whispers Ana has ever heard from him, before stating coldly to Hanzo, “You are quite a long ways from Japan, Meester Shimada.”

“...I no longer work for the clan,” Hanzo says to the group, before loosely tilting his head to Satya, “As you can see, I am doing...freelance work.”
The tension does not quite leave Ana’s body - nor Reinhardt’s, she can see - but she slinks off to the south a little more, ducking behind some semi-standing cobble walls. She’s at a strange junction in the castle’s winding path: the group is up a slight incline to her left, and directly in front of her, just beyond the small wall of cobbles, is a road leading down to the enceinte Gate itself. To her right is a small system of gatehouse towers and defensive curtain walls that connect to the gate itself. She can spy the arched, open entrance to the stone gatehouse, but she’s not sure she can make it there without being seen.

Ana pauses as the conversations ambles on to the Vishkar worker - she says something about… measuring Balderich’s armor? At this, Ana peeks out just as the conversation suddenly grows deathly still. All of them are looking at Brigitte, whose face has turned stiff and angry and cold and -

While they’re distracted, Ana darts to the gatehouse’s doorway and immediately presses herself to the cold stone wall to the left.

She waits a moment, listening for the soft chattering of mixed voices, and then quickly slinks off through the eastern-facing door, just across from a small wooden posthouse. From out in this small exposed area, she cannot see them, though she can hear their conversation ramble on, and they -

They cannot see her.

Ana ducks into a hallway in the Gate’s curtain wall proper and -

“Alright, now that we are finally here, this is the plan -”

The voice of the leader of the European Defensive squadron rings out loud and startlingly close, just on the other side of the wall. Ana jerks reflexively, twisting to her left, facing the east, facing -

Facing the Gate itself and -

There are shadows of humanoid shapes and a long sinister buttress on a hover carrier cast across the ground and -

“We will use the battering ram to break down the door -” the leader begins to explain, when an excited, furious giggle bursts out:

“OR WE CAN BLOW ‘ER DOWN, MATE.”

“...What - WAIT NO -” the leader screams and Ana -

Ana takes that as her cue to leave.

Fuck.

Fuck fear and hesitation and worthlessness.

Fuck hiding in corners and shadows.

Fuck haunting the ruins of the town like a ghost.

FUCK.

Ana bolts back out to the street and up the curving incline straight to the group -

“HOSTILE,” the archer shouts as he whips around, his arrow pointed directly at her head and Ana sees Reinhardt level his hammer and the Bastion unit jerks away from the Vishkar architech in
surprise -
She raises her hands in frantic, desperate gesturing and -
An explosion rocks out from where the gate is -

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Now I'm falling down,
Through the crashing sound.
And you've come around,
At the curtains of the waterfall.

And you rush to me,
And it sets us free.
So I fall to my knees,
At the curtains of the waterfall.

So Say Geronimo!
Say Geronimo!
Say Geronimo!
Say Geronimo!

--------

**Survivor: Attack the Objective**

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:07 p.m. - By the battering ram at the Gate of Eichenwalde

At this point, the explosions don’t surprise Mako anymore.

Fucking hell, at this point, pretty much *nothing* surprises Mako anymore.

He watches impassively through the lenses of his mask as the United European Defensive units scream and bolt behind the battering ram for shelter as Jamison’s bombs blast against the sturdy oak gate, ripping the aging wood and iron bolts to shreds. Beside him, giggling with mad, excited glee, Jamison continues to pop his little explosives in the direction of the gate, making the splintered hole in the wood wider… wider… wider -
“STOP,” the leader of the European Defensive squad and their ‘coordinator’ Schmiedl or some standard German surname or whatever, screams at them (well...at Jamison really). He jumps back out from his hiding spot behind the battering ram and rushes up to them, his lightly-armored uniform rumpled and his expression frazzled and his eyes wide with terror and confusion.

A standard response for the two of them.

“STOP,” he wheezes, grabbing at Jamison’s arm and shaking him slightly. This gets Jamison to snap out of his bomb-happy daze and glance at the man with befuddlement, muttering, “Wot.”

“Stop, please stop, the hole is wide enough, you’ve done it - stop before you kill us all,” Schmiedl gasps. The two junkers watch him with unimpressed stares until Jamison sighs wistfully, “Wot ever you say, mate.” But he turns towards Mako, grumbling softly, “Never ‘nuff bombs in the world.”

“Save them,” Mako rumbles back through the thickness of the mask as the ED squad members start moving the hover carrier forward through the yawning gate. Mako takes another deep breath - his lungs never truly seem full, not since… well, not since that day - and speaking is always difficult for him, but he pushes himself to remind Jamison, “Save them for the main gate.”

“Roight, roight, Oi know,” Jamison mumbles to himself as they set off behind the rest of the little “demolition crew,” as it had been “advertised” online. Mako hadn’t wanted to take this job, especially not after their last “demo” job in Australia had turned out to be a huge fucking scam, but Jamison had been itching to blast shit apart for awhile now, and their last good spree in Barcelona had been a couple of weeks ago. So while he hadn’t wanted to accept the job of breaking into Eichenwalde castle on behalf of the dodgy United European Defensive Front (if that’s actually the organization this little crew actually works for, and not some thin lie for yet another poorly-disguised Talon operation), Mako had relented and let Jamison sign them up for the task.

He figured that blowing up an empty castle was at least better than blowing up the city of Stuttgart.

And Mako also figured that maybe - maybe - he could actually knock the fuck outta that sniper that’s been hounding them for two months.

Mako knows the person is still around - they were a tenacious little fucker, following and flittering after them ever since their first run-in with the bounty hunter in Giza. Those tranqs and anti-healing shots had almost been amusing at first - none of the dosages were right in the beginning, so half the time Mako just felt a strange chemical exhaustion that passed shortly, and the other half the time Jamison, with his bizarre radioactive genetics, had somehow just NOT passed out - but they were steadily getting more and more dangerous. Mako had just barely dragged Jamison’s dead-to-the-world ass out of Barcelona in time, after the sniper had clipped his shoulder with a particularly strong tranq shot.

So while Mako wasn’t surprised by the bounty hunter themselves, he was surprised - he still is surprised - by the fact that the drongo just wouldn’t fucking quit.

The others usually gave up after the first two rounds, maybe three if they were persistent.

But not this one.

The Masked Shrike.

The Ghost of Egypt.

The Eye of Horus.
Behind the mask, Mako snorts to himself in derision. Pretentious fucking names. At least the shagger called The Reaper had a cool name - simple, clean, straightforward. Mako could respect that kinda name. But Masked Shrike? If Mako wasn’t so interested in environmentalism, he’d have no fucking idea what a damn “shrike” was. He knew Jamison certainly didn’t know -

Well, no. Scratch that. Jamison tended to know the strangest things. Like how to make bombs. How to speak fluent Spanish and Mandarin. How to do his own stitches. How to make a souffle. How to fix an old school auto.

...How to make a God Program.

...To this day, the world believed that the consciousness of the Rainbow Serpent program had been destroyed when their small group of revolutionaries blew the Outback Omnium into nothingness.

And the world was right.

...To an extent.

But like the snake that sheds its skin, and leaves behind only a thin membrane of its existence before diving back into the watery underworld, there were a few lingering virtual membranes of the Rainbow Serpent’s existence, resting deep in the grave of the Omnium.

And somehow -

Some-fucking-how -

Jamison “Junkrat” Fawkes was the only person in the world to have the pieces of those virtual membranes.

So basically, Mako would not be surprised if Jamison knew what a shrike was.

Mako follows Jamison’s lead, who is following the UED unit members, and ducks through the hole in the gate, glancing coldly at the remains of a Bastion Unit and a Spider Unit sitting just to the north of the enceinte curtain wall. He has no envy for the dead Crusaders here - Eichenwalde is often stated to have been one of the most hellish individual battles of the Crisis, arguably even more terrible and tragic than La Batalla de Setenta y Dos, although if Mako’s lungs still worked right, he would put up a vocal defense of the Gibson Desert Battlefront and the Battle of Jakarta as being right the fuck up there.

Sometimes, on the longer nights -

He still dreams of them.

He can still see them: the lines of Bastion units, stationed in sentry mode, across the deep red sands and green-grey scrub brush and beneath the soft skies; how the mere act of firing their Gatling guns could stir the sand and shake the scrub like the wind; how their bullets would eventually rip through every type of shield, every possible line of defense; how every airstrike somehow seemed to fail, that there was no end to their replacements -

How soldiers and comrades and medics and even armored vehicles screamed when the bullets pierced them -

How Mako had screamed when they had torn through his right shoulder, across the right parts of his face -
How even the great Overwatch Commander Gabriel Reyes had balked under the sheer pressure of trying to push back the Gibson Omnium Forces.

Mako had not been surprised when the government had basically handed over major parts of the Outback to the Omnis.

But he had also been furious.

There had been a few good years.

There had been a few good years before they gave everything away. His makeshift veterinary clinic had stood at the end of a long, dusty dirt road, lined with desert trees and the green-grey scrub brush, with water that he drew from the underground watering hole, replenished seemingly without end, a safe haven for the animals brought to his care, with wide open spaces lined with rickety fences and the rays of the sun and soft skies. He had not been the best doctor for his patients by any means, but for many of the others in the region at the edge of the sands and the skies, he had been all they could turn to when their animals grew sick -

There had been a few good years before they gave away his sanctum -

Few non-Australians and Kiwis could understand the horror, the dismay, the fury at watching parts of their already war-torn landscape get handed over to the smug metal bastards -

Fewer still could understand why the Australian Liberation Front had sought to destroy the Omnium.

But Mako -

Mako wouldn’t be surprised if the ghosts of the Eichenwalde Crusaders understood.

He thinks that perhaps here, in this quiet sanctum of lush trees and soft skies and castles dreaming of becoming mountains, the legacy of the dead would understand why the revolutionaries had destroyed the fusion core.

Although -

Mako eyes the UED unit members, now struggling just to get the battering ram’s hover carrier to turn left up the cobbled incline -

If this is the legacy of the Crusaders, Mako fears for the course of the Second Omnic Crisis.

He scowls to himself, watching with masked judgment as they finally manage to get the thing to turn and start the slow trudge up the very minor hill. He doesn’t like this business none. The whole thing reeked of disaster - the smell of homemade bombs and splintered oak wood and the faint whiff of a hover carrier running on the wrong setting and sweat from people stupidly overworking themselves.

The smell of the light traces of smoke and burning flesh from that giant of a man - clad in strange dark armor, as tall as Mako, hefting an oil-black hammer - in the squadron tailing five minutes behind them.

A smell Mako knows all too well.

Mako outright glares now.

This whole “recover Balderich’s armor” mission reeked of raising the dead.

A smell Mako hated more than the smell of Omnic oils, bleeding out across deep red sands and
green-grey scrub brush -
A smell of light traces of smoke and burning flesh and red and gold and amber nanite fluid.
Mako thinks he can still smell it -
A metal fist gently nudes into his left arm -
Which surprises Mako.
He blinks once against the sunlight dipping in through the lenses of his mask and glances to his left, where Jamison peeks up at him with one of his signature confused looks, muttering, “You alright, Hoggie? Awful quiet today… Well! Quieter than usual,” Jamison cackles, cracking himself up with his cutting wit.
Mako makes an impassive face before wheezing, “Just thinking. Feels wrong to be here. Like this.” Jamison gives him a skeptical squint, saying slowly, “…Oi’m not followin’.”

“HELLO ZHERE.”
Now -

That surprises Mako.
And apparently everyone else around the battering ram because they all come to a still-frame dead stop as the words roll over them like thunder surging in through the soft skies. With what feels like the speed of molasses, Mako shuffles to the right of the battering ram to try and get a better look, Jamison following behind him, as the UED unit members gawk and stare and -
There’s a fucking living Crusader standing before them, at the curve just up the road, in front of a partially-destroyed wall of cobbles.
Mako has seen him once before.
Amid deep red sands and green-grey scrub.

Surrounded by small red turrets and the golden liquid glow of a biotic field and the lingering scent of shotgun smoke -
A lithe sniper following in his shadow, for without trees and walls to hide behind, she chose instead to hide behind the shimmering blue shield and polished white-silver plates of armor -
Cracking shots that split the heads of Bastion Units, bleeding Omnic oil across deep red sand and green-grey scrub.

“WILHELM?” Schmiedl gasps and wheezes, apparently just as surprised as Mako feels, “Reinhardt Wilhelm??”

“ZHAT ES ME, YES,” the Crusader states loudly and proudly, striking a fierce pose as he slams the head of his rocket hammer into the cobblestone street beneath him and Mako swears the ground shakes a little with the motion. Beside him, Jamison’s jaw drops a little, and Mako thinks distantly:

*Something finally shut him up.*
A soft flutter of movement catches a glint off of the right lens of Mako’s mask and he tilts his head
towards it. A relatively short woman with long brown hair, worried eyes, and light body armor peeks around the corner of the defensive archway, before cautiously making her way over to the Crusader, whose beaming expression is slowly shifting like deep red sands -

“...Zhat es a European Defensive uniform, es it not?” Reinhardt asks slowly as the woman draws herself up beside him, eyeing them all suspiciously. Schmiedl gawks openly for another moment before stammering, “I - YES! Yes, sir, it is! We are here to reclaim Balderich von Alder’s armor for the Defensive, sir!”

“...What,” the woman says in a loud whisper, and Reinhardt’s face shifts to an open scowl as he mutters even louder than her, “...And WHY es ze United European Defensive here to reclaim my master’s armor?”

Mako may have been surprised by the current turn of events -

But he’s not at all surprised that this shit is going way south, way fast.

“We - we are reinitiating the Supersoldier Crusader Program, sir!” Schmiedl says, before adding on with excitement, “Actually Herr Wilhelm, this is good timing! Members of the United European Defensive have been attempting to contact you for some time! We would like you to come and lead the program -”

“Why,” the old soldier states with a voice woven from steel braids, “Es ze European Defensive reviving ze Crusader program when all ze European Defensive Crusaders are dead?”

Mako finds it even harder to breathe under the immense pressure of the words.

Besides him, Jamison chokes slightly, shooting a wide-eyed glance at Mako.

The silence that follows is deafening in its deadliness, save for the soft twittering of a songbird nearby.

“...You,” Schmiedl manages to crack out, “You are still alive, Herr Wilhelm.”

“...Young man,” Reinhardt states with that same wrought-iron coldness, as ancient and as solid as an oak gate with iron bolts and cobbled supports, “I am NOT a European Defensive Crusader.”

“...But you -”

“I am ze Overwatch Crusader.”

The words bleed across the soft skies and deep red sands and green-grey scrub of Mako’s mind.

Reinhardt - with only one good good eye, as clear and blue as the soft skies above the castle dreaming of becoming a mountain - stares down at them with the fury.

An emotion that does not surprise Mako.

An emotion Mako knows all too well.

“...If you are here to desecrate zees place,” Reinhardt furies at them, “Zhen I am afraid I will have to ask you to leave.”

“...Sir, Herr Wilhelm,” Schmiedl gasps as the other UED unit members look at each other awkwardly, “Please - let us just talk about this. The United European Defensive can certainly explain this better than I.”
“My master’s armor has rested here for thirty years,” the Crusader intones at them, “Zees es remarkable timing zhat I am afraid needs no explanation.”

“I - what, sir?”

“An old friend of mine used to say, ‘Zhere are no coincidences - only connections between larger forces zhat people cannot always see.’” Reinhardt lifts his hammer from its resting spot, hefting it in his hands, but his good eye never leaves them, roaming over the crowd until it rests on Mako’s mask. Mako watches as the eye of soft skies squints at him appraisingly, and the survivalist -

He is not surprised to see the steel-cold fury in the Crusader’s gaze.

The UED unit members look on in pure terror.

Beside him, Jamison snaps a few more bombs into his launcher.

“...I may only have one good eye zthese days,” Reinhardt continues, as the woman beside him clicks something on her left arm guard. A small, bulletproof riot shield unfolds itself as a grim look sets on her face. The Crusader continues with oil-black fury sinking into each word, “But even I can see that today, zhees meetings are no coincidences. An old crusader. A blacksmith squire. A medical sniper -”

The words do not surprise Mako.

A lithe, black-blue flutter - like the shimmering of a feather - catches a glint on the lenses of Mako’s mask and his eyes dart to the small sniper slinking between some sort of underground steps and the semi-standing cobble wall behind Reinhardt. The Masked Shrike slips out and comes to an alert standstill in the shadow of the crusader, behind white-silver plates of armor.

“An ex-yakuza archer. A Vishkar architech.”

...These words do surprise Mako.

At the latter, a young Indian woman, dressed in a surprisingly revealing outfit, the blue of the fabric as clear as the blue of the soft skies, appears around the corner of the defensive arch. She holds up a sleek white cyborg hand and twiddles her fingers at them, and everyone around the battering ram openly gawks because what in the bloody fucking hell is a Vishkar architech doing here??

Suddenly, and without warning, a short Asian man with sharp features and a surprisingly revealing outfit appears next to her, with a bow drawn taut in his hands and an arrow pointed at Schmiedl’s head. He leans over to the Vishkar architech, hissing something low to her.


The shimmering blue glow of his shield flares to life in front of him.

“I learned zhat I was not destined to be a European Defensive Super Crusader. Ze forces zhat saved me from zhis battle led me to Overwatch. Zhat I would be ze Crusader for ze world.”

And then -

“And now, ze forces have brought me here. I wondered why ze trails in ze forest seemed to lead me astray. But I see now. Zhere are no coincidences.”
And this part absolutely destroys Mako’s sense of reality -

These had been a few good years on the road, wandering the Outback, dragging Jamison through Indonesia, fighting off Talon and bounty hunters and even a strange cowboy at one point, hauling him through the streets of Hanamura as they clutched Pachimaris, riding out of Giza after having out-maneuvered a medical sniper, screaming their way through Barcelona -

And now, the devastating surprise has come to claim the sanctum of his mind -

from beneath the arch, behind the archer and the Vishkar architech -

“I am here to defend Eichenwalde from those who would come to desecrate it.”

a Bastion Unit walks into the sunlight.

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Can you feel (Say Geronimo!) my love?

Bombs away, bombs away, bombs away.

Can you feel (Say Geronimo!) my love?

(Make this leap)

Can you feel (Say Geronimo!) my love?

(Make this leap)

Can you feel my love?

Chapter End Notes

ALRIGHT

PLACE YER BETS!

Team "This is the weirdest J-RPG player party of all time" (Defenders) : Reinhardt, Brigitte, Bastion, Satya, Hanzo

Team "Who is the Masked Shrike? We just don't even know" (Unknown): Ana

Team "Hook 'em and Cook 'em" (Attackers): Roadhog (Mako), Junkrat (Jamison), United European Defense members

Team "This isn't foreshadowing at all" (Unknown): United European Defense back-up squadron, [Name encrypted]

[The Payload has reached a Checkpoint.]
I'm secretly a huge Roadhog fan. He terrifies me but I love him at the same time and I wish there was more content exploring his background.
Chapter Summary

[Select Your Hero]

Map: Eichenwalde

Defenders: Reinhardt, Brigitte, Symmetra, Hanzo, Bastion + [The Shrike] (Ana)

Attackers: Roadhog, Junkrat, United European Defense members

[5...4...3...2...1...]

Chapter Notes

Just like the Route 66 battle, we have three chapters this week! Please feel free to read the battle at your own pace - all the chapters will be here, ready when you are.

In Route 66 we started from the original checkpoint, but in Eichenwalde, we're starting from the main Castle Wall Gate. This means that the Attackers have to get the Battering Ram Payload to the Castle Doors - they have to go left up the road, straight, and then right across the bridge. Will they be able to do it with only one tank and no healers? Seems pretty impossible.

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Song is "Pompeii" by Bastille (Youtube link)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Overwatch: Eichenwalde - The Attack Commences**

*I was left to my own devices*

*Many days fell away with nothing to show*

*And the walls kept tumbling down*

*In the city that we love*

*Grey clouds roll over the hills*

*Bringing darkness from above*
But if you close your eyes -

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Srṣṭikarta: Stop the Payload

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:09 p.m. - On the southwestern curve of the road, by the edge of the defensive arch building

Satya always knew she perceived the world a little differently from “normal” individuals.

Even before the other architechs asked her, even before Sanjay told her, even before Vishkar nurtured her, she knew, she knew - if anything, Satya is keenly, crisply, and succinctly aware that she experiences the world a little differently from others. Sometimes colors are bright, so bright, too bright; sometimes sounds are harsh, so harsh, too harsh; sometimes words are peculiar, so peculiar, too peculiar.

Sometimes the lights are temperamental, so temperamental, too temperamental.

Sometimes, all these things needed structure.

Structure that is soft, structure that is sweet, structure that is song - a shimmering silk woven from the threads of soft sky lights and tempered, twisting truths, a thin strand of radiance made into a hard edge, a hard edge made soft and a soft edge made solid, and all throughout the process the song, the raga, rivers through her head, into her arms and wrists and fingers, into her legs and ankles and feet -

Into the dance which weaves bright colors and harsh sounds and peculiar words and hard light into soft, sweet, song structure, born of shimmering silk and soft skies.

And Satya -

She perceives them all.

Sometimes - sometimes it feels too much for her.

She is grateful, as ever, for her visor. All Vishkar architechs wear one, but hers is slightly modified (without her telling anyone, without anyone knowing) to… balance out some of the bright colors, the loud sounds, the peculiar words, and even - yes, even - some of the hard light. The screen glass gives them all a softness, a softer edge; the muffler smooths their discordant jangle into a single, streamlined song; the eye and the crown narrow her winding thoughts and the bands of light into shimmering silk threads that she weaves, she weaves, she dances and weaves.

Satya is grateful, as ever, that the parts of her visor soften the blood-curdling scream the massive man in the pig mask unleashes.

His roar is fury, pure and uninhibited and unbridled. The sound scrapes across her consciousness and Satya feels a small, secluded part of her shudder against the harshness of it. Sometimes even the feather-light touch of a knife can still feel horrific against her perception, and this sound is no different - it scratches and slides across her covered ears with grating of sand and -
Things are beginning to move.

The grand knight Reinhardt shouts out his own unintelligible sound, his smith Brigitte beside him calling out something else. Hanzo besides her makes some strange snap and slang in Japanese as his arrow flicks to the pig-man. Peeking out behind her, the Bastion -

The Bastion lets out a soft, silk squeak of surprise and -

And Satya also perceives -

Fear.

Things are beginning to unravel.

But even as the chaos of bright colors and harsh sounds and peculiar words builds around her Satya perceives the hard light - soften at the edges by her visor and by the rhythm of the raga -

As clear as crystal against the soft silk skies -

And she bends it to her will.

Creating a barrier -

The pig-man hefts something in his left hand -

The hard-light shifts and bends and flows and weaves - it is soft structure, it is silk skies, it is -

It is hard light.

The pig-man hurl(s) something towards the Bastion -

“This will protect us,” Satya says calmly to the air, to the soft silk skies and to the building chaos and to the unraveling of bright colors, harsh sounds, peculiar words, as the song and dance of her compact arm finalizes the mesh weaving. With a twist of her arm and wrist and fingers, the hard-light barrier emerges from her palm and materializes in the air in front of Hanzo, the Bastion, and herself, angled down to the battering ram from the corner where they are partially exposed. The small central core solidifies just as a massive hook on a chain clatters against the glass-like shield.

To her left, Hanzo says something sharply as he fires an arrow towards the battering ram. It hits the side and splits into several smaller pieces of shrapnel that scatter off of it, and the European Defensive members, the pig-man, and the...wiry, burning (?) man all dart away momentarily. The Bastion uses the cover and the short break to haul its bulky frame over to Reinhardt. There’s shouting and harsh sounds yet Satya is already starting to weave a turret -

“GET DOWN.”

Something yanks at her compact arm and for a moment, all of her senses are skewed, her perceptions are shifted off their axes, the universe tilts and slants. And then Satya is aware that Hanzo is pulling her back behind cover as a hailstorm of shotgun pellets and nuts and bolts (?) rain out, shattering the fragile hard-light barrier as they crack against the central core.

Satya lets Hanzo pull her back beside the partially-standing cobble wall - they’re on the north side of it, as the Bastion takes up position on the south side, behind Reinhardt’s shield. Just behind them, on the westernmost edge of the castle’s defenses, is the staircase descending into the subterranean network of tunnels, and it is here, nestled between the western buttress of the defensive arch, the
landing for the staircase, and the cobble wall, that Hanzo pulls her down into a crouching position before shifting to cover her from the exposed eastern side.

“Ms. Vaswani,” he says to her in loud, but clear words, as more bullets begin to fly behind him, “I need you to get to cover! It is not safe here -”

“I will fight.”

Her own words ring bright and vivid, loud yet true, like soft silk skies and soft hard-light textiles. It is difficult for her to sometimes perceive normalcy in these moments of chaos, yet Satya manages to level her gaze and make eye contact with him. Hanzo’s dark eyes are large and rounded with shock, yet Satya nods at him, saying with the rhythm of the raga in her tones:

“I will help protect us.”

Once he perceives her words, Hanzo scowls, muttering, “Ms. Vaswani, it is my duty to keep you safe -”

“We are outnumbered, Hanzo,” she states to him, feeling the pulse of hard-light begin to build and thread and weave inside her, in her eye and crown, in her arm and wrist and fingers. Satya glances to the building chaos behind him - the European Defensive members are emerging again from their places of cover, behind the remains of the Spider unit, from out of doors and archways -

Satya snaps her free right hand to her hard-light photon projector belted to her back and brings it between them. Her left hand adjusts several of the control mechanisms in rapid-fire movement, and Hanzo grumbles, “We should abandon this mission, Ms. Vaswani -”

“We are outnumbered, but that does not guarantee a defeat, Hanzo,” Satya says coolly, before she weaves out a small sentry turret, threaded with light and song and dance. Hanzo watches her with keen awareness as she places it on the thin, north side of the crumbling cut-limestone wall. Satya murmurs to him, “But I will stay close to Herr Wilhelm and his companion - oh hello.”

The small, masked medical sniper appears beside them, popping up from behind the stone-constructed wall. Hanzo jolts slightly at her sudden appearance, and then he jolts a second time when her hand reaches out and slaps something against his bare arm.

“なんてこったい? (tn: what the hell?)” Hanzo stutters as Satya feels the sniper’s small hand press something to her own bare arm. There’s a quick sting and then the harsh pain is gone as the sniper pulls back to be fully shielded by the freestanding wall. She pulls a small compact machine from one of her many pockets and slots the USB end of the bio-recorder into it.

“A portable biomedical-nanobot printer,” Satya states calmly. Vishkar often provided them to their field medics, allowing them to collect data and build biotic nanobots in remote locations. The medical sniper nods at her statement, and the printer flashes a few words in Arabic as it begins to process the biodata she’d collected from them -

“It will allow her to target-heal us,” Satya continues and both -

Both Hanzo and the medical sniper seize up slightly at that.

“...‘Her?’” Hanzo asks cautiously and suddenly Satya perceives where she went wrong.

“...I assumed… Forgive me,” Satya tells the medical sniper, who appears to be watching her intently behind the darkened screen glass. Satya nods slightly, “Is ‘they’ more appropriate?”
The medical sniper waits for a moment, and then nods.

“Very well,” Satya says and Hanzo sighs with a slight grumble, “Fine then. Have it your way. Sniper, be sure to keep an eye on her. I am going up.”

Now it is Satya’s turn to scowl in confusion and she glances towards him, asking, “Going up what -”

But Hanzo has already started climbing the limestone buttress of the defensive arch, the claws of his strange boots tick-tick-ticking against the stones.

“...Oh,” Satya says quietly to herself, “Up there.”

Just to be safe, Satya sticks another turret on the buttress, just above the cut of the door leading into the subterranean network of tunnels.

Beside her, the medical sniper darts to the south -

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But if you close your eyes

Does it almost feel like

Nothing changed at all?

And if you close your eyes

Does it almost feel like

You’ve been here before?

--------

払い (Shabh): Objective Unknown

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:09 a.m. - behind the western, partially-standing cobble wall

Surprisingly, her first thought is not about covering Rein.

Her first thought is getting the biodata to Brigitte.

Technically, Ana had not been thinking when Roadhog had unleashed a horrific and slightly heartbreaking scream of terror over the Bastion’s sudden appearance. All her mental energies had flooded into instincts instead, channeling into old habits that run deep in her core, from the outside inwards, and she’d rushed to Rein and Brigitte without a thought at all. She’d snapped the small stinging needle of the biorecorder to the weak joints of their armor, first tagging Reinhardt in his upper arm, automatically hitting the button for the ultra-sanitizing heater and biotic cleaner coating to cleanse the needle as she pulled it away, and then immediately twisting to snap the small pinprick to Brigitte’s upper right arm. Neither knight nor smith seemed surprised by her actions, and they had proceeded with their own combat motions even as Ana continued hers. Brigitte had shouted
something to Rein and darted south to the open archway of the gatehouse tower, as Ana had rushed to the west to get behind the cobble wall.

The bang of a shotgun had rung out in the air, followed immediately by the sound of hard-light “glass” shattering against its pressure -

Ana had managed to dart behind the rubble as the Bastion unit had replaced her position behind Reinhardt -

She’d planned, in that instinctual, non-thinking way, to rush out and tag Satya and Hanzo, but to her surprise, Hanzo had pulled himself and his Vishkar employer behind the semi-standing structure all on his own, just as she had gotten there. Ana had barely heard their conversational exchange when she’d slapped the biorecorder to Hanzo’s tattooed arm, followed immediately by tagging Satya’s “normal” exposed one.

The Shimada sniper had seemed mildly distrustful of her intentions, but Ana can’t really blame him for that.

However, as long as Satya is dedicated to helping Reinhardt and Brigitte -

Ana will help the Vishkar architech and the ex-yakuza archer stay safe and uninjured -

As best she can.

She’d only half-paid attention to the archer as he climbed (??) the buttress of the defensive archway, getting himself to higher ground, and then -

This is when Ana starts thinking again. Real thoughts - not just pure adrenaline instincts.

Ana leaves the Vishkar architech to her work and whips around the Bastion, which has basically plunked itself into the tiny space between the partially-standing cobble wall and the thicker, rounder gatehouse tower of the enceinte curtain wall. It beeps merrily before shifting itself into its turret mode and Ana won’t lie, not even to herself -

It’s fucking terrifying to see a turreted Bastion up close once again.

*I used to kill ones like you, just like this,* Ana thinks dryly as she pats a warning hand on the Bastion’s reconfigured head, by the glowing blue core panel.

*I used to snipe these panels.*

*I used to pierce your cores through here.*

Somehow, the Bastion seems to understand her intentions, because it bweeps at her. Ana takes that as a sign that it’s okay and she -

She pulls herself up on top of it, and vaults over to the other side.

Inside her screenglass mask, a small message pings from the nanobot printer: جاهز. The machine is done collecting the biodata from the recorder, and the biotic nanobots are ready to be properly deployed. In a single fluid motion, still moving, now in-between Rein’s massive shimmering blue shield and the Bastion behind her, Ana snaps a connector between the nanobot printer and the first set of biotic fluid vials in another pouch, letting the printer deposit the first wave of 3D-printed mini robots into the biotic fluid to help keep them alive. Based on her (rather convoluted) personal set-up, the vials will automatically begin distributing the biotic fluids and biobots into her rifle darts and
biotic grenades.

The European Defensive members are pulling themselves back up around the battering ram, shouting things in German and French and maybe some Italian, and amidst their shouts there are small, rounded frag bombs bouncing (seemingly) haphazardly over the battering ram against Reinhardt’s shield.

Very briefly, Ana taps a hand on the armor on Rein’s lower back -

*I’m here.*

*I have your back.*

The old Crusader hardly moves, but Ana notices how he tilts his head towards her slightly, rumbling out, “Acknowledged!”

Against the sounds of rifle fire and small, homemade frag bombs exploding with surprisingly cheerful pops and bangs, Ana rushes into the open doorway leading into the enceinte gatehouse tower.

It’s the same one she’d rushed into earlier, before the European Defensive members and their “demolition specialists” had destroyed the Gate, and it is here, in the junction of stairs leading up to the west, and another small archway opening to the east, that she finds Brigitte.

Already, the blacksmith is hard at work setting up her mobile forge.

As expected of Torb’s daughter and apprentice. Torbjörn used to struggle to say it in person, claiming that he “never wanted to show her special treatment - she wants to eventually join Overwatch, after all,” but he always had high, if gruff praise for his youngest daughter. She was so much like him, carrying all the keen, crystal-clear thoughtfulness and perception of a studied mechanist or engineer, yet she also possessed the strength-of-spirit and fortitude to forge her way in battle. Ana knew through her few interactions with the youngest Lindholm that the former had drawn her to study under Torb, while the latter -

The latter had drawn her to “squire” under Reinhardt.

And Ana will be ever grateful that she’d chosen to strengthen his armor in the years Ana herself could not.

Brigitte is nestled by the wall in between the two doorways, her case plopped in front of her, her hands working rapidly, almost too fast for her clear eyes to keep up, as she cranks pieces of a Lindholm turret together, building legs and body and gun. There’s heat radiating off the small forge, but she hardly seems to mind, her thickly-gloved fingers grabbing the hot pieces and welding and hammering them together -

Ana removes the biorecorder with a soft click and holds it out to her without a word.

Brigitte spares her only a fleeting glance before her right hand darts out and snatches the biorecorder, mumbling, “Biodata?”

Ana nods as a small bomb explodes outside and the rattling of rifle fire peppers against Rein’s photon shield. There’s the quick response of the Bastion’s Gatling gun firing off and the shouts of European Defensive members diving for cover somewhere.

Brigitte snaps the USB end into part of the turret’s interface, tapping several buttons rapidly as she
asks calmly, “It has yours too?” Ana nods again, impressed with the young woman’s intense focus, and the smith changes a few more settings on the turret’s internal programming before asking, “May I hold onto this until the end of the battle? I will need it for other turrets.”

Ana shrugs and then nods. Brigitte glances at her, saying softly, “If you need it again for whatever reason, come get it from me, okay?” Ana gives her a small thumbs up sign and Brigitte smirks, before shouting out, “Rein! Turret being deployed!”

“UNDERSTOOD, BRIGITTE!”

Brigitte removes the biorecorder and shoves it into one of the slots of her mobile forge before hauling the small turret to the eastern door, settling it at a slight angle to the northeast, where it has a clear line of sight between the gatehouse door and the road before them.

She hits a switch -

And the advanced, multi-pattern-recognition IFF-tracking algorithms, synchronized by a single operative, autonomous program -

The Lindholm IFF-tracker -

Beeps to life on the turret.

And it immediately begins firing on the emerging European Defensive members.

Now, Ana does recognize the words for “run” and “retreat” in German, French, and Italian -

She does not think much on them, though.

Ana squares up against the northern archway, removing the old biotic darts from her rifle and slotting in the ones with the new nanobots. She glances to Rein, whose shield is beginning to give out, but turns her attention to Hanzo, way up on top of the defensive arch. He’s barely exposed, firing off arrow after arrow down to the battering ram, but it’s just enough for a rifle shot to clip him. Ana snaps on the focus on her rifle and lines up her shot -

BANG!

The first dart sticks to Hanzo’s covered right shoulder and she watches him react - first to the burn of the rifle bullet, and then to the small sting of the biodart, and then to the immediate healing relief flooding his senses.

“BARRIER’S GIVING OUT!”

The booming voice of her knight grabs her attention, and Ana is immediately twisting to Reinhardt, much closer than Hanzo, immediately to her northeast. The cracks in his shield are numerous and she can see the intense consternation on his face -

“Photon barrier deployed.”

Satya is suddenly behind the Bastion, and with a snap of her compact arm, a bright blue oval shape spreads out across them, moving forward slowly. Reinhardt backs up just enough to dive (as much as his bulky armor will allow) into the gatehouse where Ana and Brigitte are hiding, and the hard-light barrier replaces him just briefly.

“...Hello!” Reinhardt says to them cheerfully, as if they were not in fact engaging in a strange,
impromptu battle with members of his old army and a couple of Australian junkers with handmade, homemade bombs in the brittle, cut-stone remains of a German fairy tale castle. Brigitte is immediately at his side, welding something on his small, lion-headed shield core and slapping some odd bits of reinforcing materials at certain weak parts in his armor.

“Shield should be repaired in approximately five seconds,” Brigitte states with even uniformity to her voice, but her eyes and hands are darting everywhere, even as she asks, “How is the hammer looking?”

“BAH! Et es as good as evah,” Reinhardt boasts and Ana notices that Brigitte gives him a small roll of her eyes, mirroring Ana’s own skeptical expression nearly perfectly.

“I am gonna need more materials, Rein,” Brigitte informs him, “Keep protecting the Bastion and Satya, but I will need to head out to the Spider unit to collect scraps. That Hanzo guy needs more armor as soon as possible.”

_**Hanzo needs more sleeves,**_ Ana thinks dryly as she shoots another dart in the archer’s direction. He’s somehow doing a good job of distracting the European Defensive members even though the Bastion unit is sitting right there, but Satya is making hard-light barrier after hard-light barrier and keeping it reasonably shielded.

Brigitte smacks a solid, reassuring hand on Reinhardt’s shield arm before turning to Ana, asking, “Sniper, will you cover me?”

_**Your turret will do a better job than I will,**_ Ana intones mainly to herself, but she nods anyways.

She will do whatever it takes to watch Brigitte’s back.

Reinhardt and Brigitte glance at each, give themselves reassuring nods, and then rush off in their separate directions - Reinhardt north, back out through the doorway and into the exposed road, his barrier up immediately as he returns to covering the turreted Bastion and Satya, and Brigitte to the east, moving past her, slipping behind her turret and out to the rest of the enceinte curtain wall.

Ana is readying another dart when a shadow - large and looming and threatening - moves out of the western door of the bailey tower across the way, just northeast of the curve in the road where their small group is situated.

_FUCK -_

Ana lifts her left arm with the sleep dart - its range is shorter than the rifle but its dosage is powerful, intense -

Because she’s cranked up the sedative just for this monster of a man who continues to elude her -

But a small frag bomb bounces past Reinhardt’s shield at an odd, almost impossible angle and explodes in the center of their little group -

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_**How am I gonna be an optimist about this?**_

_**How am I gonna be an optimist about this?**_
Scrapper: Move the Payload

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:09 p.m. - By the battering ram at the southeastern part of the Castle Road

Junkrat is not surprised by the shout of fury that rattles everything - the dust of the cobble stones, the metal ribcage of the battering ram, the bones of the European Defensive drongos, the frag grenades in his launcher -

Or that it rattles the pure, bursting anger in Junkrat’s own soul.

All these bots’re supposed ta be DEAD, he screams in his own head, lifting his frag launcher as Hog hurls his chained hook in a flash - but then there’s a bright burst of light and both hook and frag clank uselessly against a strange, glasslike barrier that emerges from the Vishkar lady. Hog snarls something in Maori as the archer shoots something to the battering ram -

It snaps into smaller shrapnel pieces that fragment and zing and dart about them, and Junkrat feels several small bits sting into his thickened, exposed skin -

Hog levels his shotgun at the barrier and bangs off a shot of pellets and nuts and bolts, cracking and shattering the glasslike substance but it’s already too late -

The Bastion has moved behind the giant Crusader.

Junkrat knows -

Jamison knows he perceives the world a little differently from others.

He’s pretty sure that’s due to the radiation.

So it feels like time slows down a little - time dilates itself in an odd, bending way - as the Bastion unit shifts from its damn humanoid position into its damnable turret form.

Junkrat has never seen a living Bastion before, and today -

Today he gets the chance to kill one -

There’s a strange glee welling up inside him -

(He’s pretty sure that’s the radiation)

In time-dilation motion, the Bastion turns its turret towards them -

There’s a flurry of words in a multitude of languages - “Correr!” and “Lauf!” and “Courir!” - and the next thing Junkrat perceives is a massive hand grabbing his right upper arm and dragging him into the open doorway just north of where they’re standing, yanking him behind the mortared stone wall of the bailey tower as a hailstorm of bullets pierce into the exact spot where they had been standing.

“I’m always saving yer skin,” Hog grumbles at him, but Junkrat is already moving, already giggling, already seeing traps in doorways and remote detonations and the perfect angle for frag grenade
“And you’ll go roight here!” he exclaims as he pushes past some of the European Defensive members hiding out with them, placing a steel snap trap just in the corner of the open archway, partially buried under stand and stone chips. Junkrat looms back only for a second to appraise his work, muttering, “Oh, that’s a good spot!” before he’s darting up the stairs to the second story of the ancient barracks, shouting out, “Don’t none of you drongos step on that! ...Or do, it ain’t no leg of mine!” He punctuates the sentence with a wild burst of giggles and hauls himself up to the wood- and-cobble landing of the second floor.

Somewhere behind him, Hog sighs with irritation.

Junkrat thinks that might be the radiation but with Hoggie it’s hard to tell sometimes.

He surveys the landing briefly - there’s another flight of stairs up to the defensive arch proper, might not be a bad idea to lob bombs down onto the group, but he may not have true cover from the bloody bounty hunter running around, or the strange Japanese archer hanging about. There are also two doors, one opening to the south, almost directly overhead of where their battering ram had stopped. The other opened to the west, just below the defensive arch, and Junkrat thinks -

Jamison perceives -

That this might be the best route for him at the moment.

Behind him, Hog and some of the European Defensive members have followed him up the stairs, and Junkrat sets off for the western doorway, his regular foot and peg leg setting off, uneven discordant tones across the limestone blocks. They’re quickly muffled by Hog’s steady thud-thud as the two of them peer out across the road.

The Bastion is still positioned in its turret form, only the Crusader is gone - he’s ducking into the southern defensive tower of the Gate Wall, as the Vishkar lady projects more of those unusual hard-light barriers to the east, towards the battering ram, where some of the other European Defensive members are firing off rifles. That drongo Schmiedl is trying to rally them or say something or wotever - it’s all fallin’ on bomb-and-shotgun-and-turret deafened ears, and Junkrat spots another small auto-turret hanging out on the eastern side of the southern enceinte gatehouse.

Yet another damn machine to blow up.

Hog falls in beside him, and Junkrat turns to give him a crooked smile:

“Cook ‘em and hook ‘em, mate?”

Hog stares at him behind those semi-reflective lenses of his gas mask, and he grunts out, “Whatever you say,” but Junkrat can feel the tension growing in the big enforcer.

Because there’s only ever been two routes for them:

Cook ‘em and hook ‘em.

And hook ‘em and cook ‘em.

And the difference between the two -

Well, Jamison knows that’s just pure tactics roight there.
The big Crusader is lumbering back out of the southern defensive gatehouse tower, returning to his eastward-facing position as he covers the Bastion from rifle fire, but there’s just a slip of a gap between the edge of the photon shield and the Bastion’s left corner -

Behind him, Hog surges forward through the gap of the doorway -

The Shrike appears in the southern defensive gatehouse doorway, lifting their left arm - the one with the tranq dart, Junkrat knows now after their tango in Barcelona - towards Hog and Junkrat -

This is why they’re going the “cook ‘em and hook ‘em” route right now.

Junkrat pops a frag grenade out the door, to the west - it bounces against the partially-standing cut-stone rubble and ricochets off to the side, at just the right angle, into the space between the Crusader and the Bastion and the Shrike -

He hardly waits before the radiation giggles take over and he’s clicking another grenade in the same direction, using the same angle, as the shouts of the Crusader and the wailing beeps of the Bastion ring loud and true to his strangely perceptive senses and -

Things are beginning to mayhem -

Just beside him, Hog hurls his massive hook at the Bastion -

With the Crusader disoriented and distracted by the bombs, his shield has shifted enough to leave the Bastion, even in turret mode, completely exposed from the northwest angle and in a time-dilation movement, it swings its Gatling gun towards them but -

It is a second too late.

Hog’s hook manages to slip around an exposed angle of the Bastion’s sentry mode and, as if running on pure instincts and old habits alone, Roadhog pulls back on the flying, snapping chain -

Alongside the screaming of bombs and bullets and humans being wounded -

There is the screaming of a Bastion in fear.

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We were caught up and lost in all of our vices

In your poses as the dust settled around us

And the walls kept tumbling down

In the city that we love

Great clouds roll over the hills

Bringing darkness from above
But if you close your eyes -

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**Statio: Stop the Payload**

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:11 p.m. - currently being dragged across the street at a northwest angle at approximately 40 meters per second.

This is a surprise, but the emotion it is feeling is not new for the Bastion.

It is *unbelievably afraid*.

It screams.

It screams as it is *ripped* out of stability and stationary existence into hurtling speed across the stony human trail, being pulled away from its corner of safety surrounded by nice humans to terrifying and increasing closeness with *not* nice humans, to humans with funny boar faces and strangely smoking fur and long metal claw arms, to humans that launch bombs and hooks and *screams of pain* -

The boar-human had screamed in such *pain*.

It had not wanted to fight these humans, but then the boar-human had thrown something at it, and the human with the long dark hair and armor (?) the color of the sky had made something with the color and texture of the river streams and then -

Things have begun to *war*.

It did not want to fight these humans.

It does not want to fight these humans.

Even hurtling at 40 meters a second across nearly 15 - 20 meters of space, it still does not want to fight these humans.

But it also does not want to *die*.

So it *screams* as it is torn from the side of the giant armored human - Reinhardt, its memory cores and logic algorithms blink at it from inside its consciousness. Reinhardt roars something fiercely, a vocal pattern it does not recognize, as it is pulled screaming from his side, surging towards the door in the rocky manmade cave creation, where the boar-human and the smoking human wait to hurt it, *to hurt it* -

The smoking human is readying more of those small bombs, a wild and toothy expression wide on its angular face -

The boar-human is as impassive as ever, yet it is lifting its right hand with a massive, stout gun towards it -

It is *screaming* -

*images of the battlefield, red red red red red, screaming red, screaming bombs, screaming humans,*
screaming Bastions, screaming screaming screaming, bright colors and harsh sounds and peculiar words and hard light and broken beyond repair repair repair - bleed across its memory cores and into the edges of the forefront of its consciousness - the blue blue blue skies are dyed red red red red like the strange liquids humans leak when they are broken, broken beyond repair and there is fire and bombs and screaming screaming screaming -

The massive, stout gun is leveled at the Bastion -

There’s a miniature explosion and -

Part of the Bastion’s shoulder joint and neck joint and even part of its face-plating is ripped away from it, shredded in an instant and it is screaming screaming screaming as red red red red flares onto the edges of its vision as cores and warnings scream scream scream into life about the damages it is sustaining and -

The memory cores it retrieved from the fallen Bastion in the field of grass did not warn it there would be such pain, such pain, such red red red red pain -

It does not want to fight these humans -

But it does not want to die.

It is leveling its gun arm towards them in semi-obscured vision as it screams screams screams but then -

“SCATTER!”

Something whizzes past the Bastion’s injured left paneling and dashes against the limestone manmade cave door and splits into smaller, smaller parts, plinking and clattering and darting away dangerously. The two not nice humans pull back - the smoking one is hissing something and the boar-human is shouting something and they are falling back into the semi-shadows of the rocky manmade cave and the Bastion -

It is already turning and running as fast as its joint-legs will carry it.

It dashes straight across the street, to the small niche between a partially-standing stony formation and the limestone manmade cliff, to the human with skin like the richness of deep, nurturing earth and eyes as bright as pebbles beneath a flowing stream and cloudlike armor of soft skies -

The human is small, about as small as the human Brigitte, but the human waves that strange white limb and another shimmering water wall appears and the Bastion rushes past it and into the small alcove where the light-bending human hides away.

It stumbles into the secluded space behind the partially-standing stony wall and nearly collapses as the light-bending human of the sweet, stream voice gasps, “Oh my, that looks terrible - can I help -”

But it is already repairing.

The human stops and stares as the Bastion switches out its hand limb for the repair solder, welding back the blown out bits and pieces, melding it with small bursts of stored fusion energy that seem, oddly, to stitch together some of the charred metal plates and wires in a way that does not entirely make sense, even to the Bastion’s logic algorithms.

The Omnium central core had told it that fusion energy - the energy that powered all Omnis - could possess strange repair properties.
And so, before deployment -

Without it telling anyone, without anyone knowing -

The Bastion had added the repair welder and fusion dispenser to itself.

It was not standard SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 modelwork.

It was not a part of protocols.

SST Laboratories Siege Automaton E54 were supposed to have one gun limb, one hand limb, and one Gatling gun.

They were not supposed to have the repair welder and fusion dispenser.

But the Bastion had not seen the logic in going without one.

And so, it had taken it upon itself to improve itself.

To better itself.

The Bastion bweeps wistfully as the welder-dispenser does all that it can, but it is still not up to to full stability. The light-bending human watches with mild awe as the Bastion rights itself, shaking out its hand limb and testing that it still possesses the full range of motion. It does, but the shoulder joint is slightly weak in the gaps of the materials. It will require more metal plating, probably soon.

“We will need to fall back,” the light-bending human says calmly, before glancing up at the rivercobbled cliff wall. It says with more volume, “Hanzo, we must fall back. The Bastion is injured and we have lost ground -”

The human with the strange shooting device leans over the cliff wall slightly, his smoke-dark hair swaying in the breeze - the Bastion likes the long flower-yellow tie piece that binds its hair together, fluttering and flittering about like a feather. Its dark eyes narrow at them, but it nods all the same, and the light-bending human turns slightly, saying at that louder volume, “Herr Wilhelm, we need -”

But the vocalization is cut off -

Because the boar-human has returned.

It is almost directly across the manmade trail of rocks from them.

It is striding out of the door of the cut stone manmade cave, lifting its massive stout gun towards them, and the Bastion screams and the light-bending human is saying something with pain and fear, gesturing with that strange white limb as its hands shake and -

The boar-human fires and the light-bending human screams as shards of metal spray across it -

“AAAAAAAAAHAAAAH -”

There is a sharp, strong vocalization from south of their position and -

Reinhardt rockets past them.

This is not a metaphor the Bastion dreams up.

No, the giant human encased in armor plating literally rockets past them, some sort of energy-
powered pack built into his armor glowing on his back, crashing into the boar-human and hurling both of them northward, up the slight incline and towards the northern limestone manmade cliff walls - both Reinhardt and the boar-human are shouting something the Bastion does not understand as they disappear past the stony manmade cliff bridge -

The light-bending human is pulling back close to it, clutching at part of its face and the Bastion -

There is leaking red red red red pouring from its deep, nurturing-earth face, its head armor and visor is shattered and cracked and -

A small hand pushes the Bastion aside.

The tiny human, the one encased in all-dark armor and feathery fluttering trimmed in blue, wedges past the Bastion and smashes some strange vial on the ground, and the air fills with aerosolized biotic fluids and nanobots - the Bastion’s cores detect them buzzing about in the air. The light-bending human slowly lowers its hands, and the Bastion sees that the red red red red is already fading, the shorn deep, nurturing-earth flesh repair itself and it -

It feels such relief.

This nice human will not be broken beyond repair.

Not now.

The tiny, all-dark human props a hand under the light-bending human’s jaw, tilting the latter’s head back and forth. The light-bending human stammers, “I - I am fine. I turned away at the last moment.” Even so, the all-dark, fluttery human pulls out a small dart and sticks it into the arm limb of the light-bending human, before nodding slowly. The light-bending human whispers, “…Thank you,” before it lifts that white arm limb and -

It repairs its head armor and visor.

The three of them sit in quiet calm for a moment until the light-bending human says slowly, “...We must regroup. Where is Brigitte?”

The all-dark, fluttery human gestures to the southeast and the light-bending human opens its mouth to respond when suddenly -

“HELP, OH MY GOD, HELP -”

Comes screaming up from the descending steps to the west, to the Bastion’s left.

The pattern recognition centers of the Bastion’s consciousness perceives the sounds as coming from Brigitte.

All three of them rise and move towards the steps when -

Brigitte emerges, stumbling across the steps, hauling her case on her back and rushing out at a strange angle, keeping her torso twisted slightly to keep her shield behind her as several small explosions go off beneath them -

Already, the all-dark, fluttery human is firing shots into the subterranean depths and the light-bending human is adjusting the settings on a small white claw-gun, firing a long strand of light down into the darkness and -
Brigitte staggers her way up to them before partially-collapsing against the partially-standing stony wall and -

Her left foot is missing.

The Bastion nearly screams -

Except -

Except there is no red red red red.

The Bastion watches in awe as Brigitte drops several pieces of metal onto the stony ground, before grabbing one chunk. She slings her case forward and cracks it open, cranking up some dial as heat *floods* out of the small mechanist system. She jams the metal chunk into a molten core for one-two-three before removing it with a small set of pliers. Hefting a hammer in her other hand, Brigitte smashes it into the red red red red metal, bending and shaping it into a rough “foot” limb shape.

She then rolls up part of her fluttery armor leg and -

The Bastion sees that her left leg limb is not flesh

But metal.

Brigitte jams the cooling chunk onto a peg on the end of a ball-joint, and then, with deftness that makes the Bastion almost dizzy, swaps out the hammer for a small welder. She bends over and solders the new foot into place, and from over its shoulder, the light-bending human asks, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, just peachy. Just walked right into that one, idiot me.” Brigitte stands and tests the foot limb, rocking back and forth slightly before grinning at all of them, “All fixed up! Well, it’ll be a little awkward to run, but I’ll make myself a better foot later.”

“...Oh that is rather impressive,” the light-bending human says calmly and then -

There is the *thundering* of multiple feet on the manmade path of river cobbles and the three of them - the all-dark, fluttery human is still peering into the subterranean darkness - looking around the partially-standing cut-stone rubble and -

The humans covered in dark armor have rejoined their giant metal-encased tree on a hover carrier and are -

They are right next to the small group.

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**Squire: Stop the Payload**

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:10 p.m. - the western gatehouse tower in the Gate curtain wall

Brigitte gives herself a quick pause to collect her case and then she is darting out the eastern doorway.

She rushes past a small, molding posthouse before veering right and into the brace of the Gate itself. There’s splintered wood and twisted wrought iron covering everything here, and there’s a gaping
hole where she assumes the European Defensive assholes blew through the gate itself. Her intention is to wrap around the Gate and back up to the remains of the Spider unit by the eastern edge, where she can scavenge some metal parts to begin making lightweight body armor -

Suddenly, there are two of the European Defensive members there, stumbling back through the hole in the Gate, as turret fire smatters behind them -

Brigitte does not hesitate.

She grew up fighting, just like her father and mother and godfather.

She grew up amid bombed out neighborhoods, the shells of houses, the skeletons of buildings, Bastions and Spiders rotting in the streets where the United Nations “clean up” crews and this exact European Defensive military had left them.

She grew up scrapping and scraping and surviving –

Just like Pappa.

Brigitte does not hesitate.

She smashes her bulletproof shield into the face of the first guy, catching him by surprise. The solid metal-carbon-fiberglass combination breaks his nose and the man is stumbling back even further, dropping his rifle to clutch at his face -

Bad combat discipline, her father would say - your gun is often your only ally in the field.

The act of bashing the first guy’s face in draws the attention of the second European Defensive member and he’s raising his rifle -

But Brigitte has good combat discipline.

Her own small shotgun - modeled after Torbjörn’s - is already leveled in her right hand, and she fires off a blast square in his chest. His lightly padded armor protects him from any real damage, but that was not her goal. He staggers a little under the pressure, his rifle aimed away from her now, and she swoops in before unloading her next pellet in his face. He staggers and slumps, his face a red, bleeding disaster, but Brigitte is twisting back around, lifting her shield -

She blocks a glancing shot from the first guy’s rifle before speeding into his space again. Brigitte presses her shield up against the rifle in his hands, angling it out of the way, and then slots her shotgun up against his jaw -

“Time for a fix-up,” she says before squeezing the trigger.

He falls back from the force of the shot and Brigitte is already holstering her shotgun to her side, before diving after him. She ignores the mess of his head and quickly undoes several of the straps on his padded chest armor - she can quickly add reinforcements to it, and it should fit Hanzo or Satya just fine in a pinch. Running purely on instinct and old habits, Brigitte collects his chest armor and the second man’s armor, slinging them over her case before she darts out of the easternmost doorway to the Spider unit.

The fight is not intense around Rein, per se, but Brigitte is still slightly uneasy. Her small turret still guards the doorway to the medical sniper’s hideout, pinging European Defensive members who step out of line around the battering ram.
Yet it avoids Brigitte entirely.

_Pappa’s IFF-tracking really is a work of creative genius_, Brigitte thinks as she hastily collects several large scrap pieces off the rotting Spider unit. The material is weaker than she likes, but with the two chest pieces mostly intact, she won’t have to do much to reinforce them -

Suddenly, Reinhardt is shouting something and Brigitte peeks out from around the dead Omnic to see that -

Several bombs are exploding between Rein and the Bastion -

A massive hook emerges from the northern corner of the defensive archway building -

Just to her right, several of the European Defensive members still standing rush out from the defensive archway building to the battering ram, firing collectively on her turret.

...Well, fuck.

Brigitte watches in horror as the hook latches onto an exposed part of the Bastion, Reinhardt is twisting and turning but it’s too late -

_FUCK._

And now Brigitte is isolated on the eastern side of the Castle Road.

The European Defensive members are starting to push behind the battering ram, moving it forward. She bolts, making a break for the hole in the Gate again when she skids to a stop -

Brigitte’s eyes grow wide in horror.

Far, down by where the old music shop and computer lab are located, probably 50 - 60 meters away -

Another group of European Defensive members are entering into the town.

Brigitte almost attempts to count them, except -

Something - or rather, someone -

Someone over two meters tall, covered in hulking black armor, glinting eerily under the sunlight, glowing a strange red-gold-amber at the seams, is bringing up the rear of the new squadron.

Brigitte is about to _scream_ for Reinhardt, when she tears her gaze away from the horror slowly advancing on their position and she watches in _further horror_ as Reinhardt -

Reinhardt fucking _rockets_ himself northward up the street.

Now Brigitte is _truly_ isolated.

She runs on pure instinct and old habits alone.

Still holding some of her scrap, Brigitte bolts for the doorway to the bailey tower just to her north. She’s been to Eichenwalde enough times with Rein over the years to remember that there’s a subterranean tunnel that will connect her back to Satya’s position, and the majority of the European Defensive members are back around the battering ram, trying to drive it further up the cobbled street.
She enters the cool shadows of the barracks buttress and -

Something snaps on her left foot.

She’s screaming, falling forward, twisting to land on her side and not on her face, and slams sideways into the dirt and dust coating the flooring here. With a hacking cough, Brigitte lifts watering eyes to her foot -

Her artificial prosthetic -

Trapped in a fucking steel bear trap.

What in the fucking hell -

Suddenly, without warning, a tall, spindly, bare-chested man with smoking hair appears at the top of the wooden stairs before her. Brigitte’s quick-witted enough to catch a glimpse of the metal hand and the metal peg leg -

Also all the fucking explosives strapped to his chest and his homemade frag launcher in his metal grip.

It only takes her a second to recognize him - not by name

But by type.

A junker.

“Oh!” he giggles eagerly as Brigitte torques herself, raising her shield towards him, but the junker just laughs, “You really stepped in it, mate!” He’s grinning at her madly as she pulls her shotgun out from the holster at her side, his wide eyes following the motion of the gun gleefully as she -

She fucking blasts her own foot off.

“...Oi, wot in THE FUCK,” the junker says loudly with obvious confusion and shock as Brigitte rocks up onto her now uneven feet. She’s got an awkward hunch, almost mirroring his perfectly, and his eyes drift to her ripped pant leg, where the barest part of a ball-joint for her ankle is exposed.

“Never underestimate the engineer,” she snarls at him, before tilting her shotgun up at him and firing.

He jumps back in time, yelping as some of the shotgun pellets sting his good leg, but Brigitte is rushing down the underground hallway as fast as her awkward legs will carry her… which is, unfortunately, not very fast at all. It’s been years since she last relied on a peg leg, and the ball-joint is arguably more a hinderance than a help at this moment, rolling her left leg awkwardly as she hobbles across the dimly-lit tunnel, before -

There are small bombs popping and bouncing around behind her, chasing after her, exploding hot on her one good heel and she’s shrieking as she nears the western end of the tunnel, “HELP, OH MY GOD, HELP.” There’s a mad and furious giggle behind her, like something from an old school horror film, as though some crazed bomber is attempting to track her down.

Which, given the circumstances, is actually accurate as all hell.

She’s bolting to the left, hobbling up the stairs as more bombs bounce and ping about in her wake, and the junker is screaming after her, “You won’t get rid of me that easily!”

Suddenly, like a miracle, the medical sniper is peering over the edge of the staircase, firing a healing
dart at her. Brigitte feels the pinprick bite as it settles into her shoulder, but relaxes as a surge of energy and adrenaline rush through her, and she pushes herself up the last few steps. Satya shortly follows behind the sniper, firing that strange Vishkar photon projector of hers into the half-shadows below.

Brigitte practically crawls her way over to the partially-standing cobble wall, before dumping the scrap still clutched in her shield arm and twisting off her case and cracking it open. She hefts a sizable chunk of solid metal in her hands before dunking it in the running forge. The Bastion seems to watch her quiet work with a strange curiosity, and shortly, Satya joins him, her dark gaze mesmerized by Brigitte’s quick work.

“...Are you alright?” Satya asks after a moment, and Brigitte snaps the makeshift foot onto the peg of the ball-joint to anchor it in place.

“Yeah, yeah, just peachy. Just walked right into that one, idiot me.” She rises and does some quick stress tests on the replacement foot, rocking back and forth slightly before grinning at all of them, “All fixed up! Well, it’ll be a little awkward to run, but I’ll make myself a better foot later.”

“...Oh that is rather impressive,” Satya says quietly and then -

There is the pounding of feet on cobbled pavement, and the three of them are turning to the road - Where the European Defensive members are pushing the battering ram up the incline, just south of the archway.

---------


Does it almost feel like
Nothing changed at all?
And if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
You've been here before?

How am I gonna be an optimist about this?
How am I gonna be an optimist about this?

Chapter End Notes

TYPICAL REINHARDT.
ALWAYS CHARGING OUT OF POSITION.
...no, I'm not salty about playing the Uprising event with randoms.
Overwatch: Eichenwalde - The Payload Advances

Chapter Summary

Eichenwalde - The Payload Advances

but something moves on the Attackers' side?

Chapter Notes

LadyTamyra, this chapter is for you.

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Song is "Mirror Mirror (White Trailer)" by Jeff Williams (Ft. Casey Lee Williams) (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Eichenwalde - The Payload Advances

Mirror, tell me something,

Tell me who's the loneliest of all?

---------

Schild Flashback: The Last of His Kind

November 29, 2070: 2:33 p.m. - Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, United States

His good eye is hardly seeing anything.

His good mind is hardly processing anything.

It is no wonder, then, that Torb’s words slip right past his consciousness.

“...Eh?” Reinhardt says belated, giving a slow, molasses glance down to his left. Torbjörn looks up at him from about waist-height, but the glare he gives the old Crusader is not his usual semi-sarcastic, semi-feigned scowl. This look is deep and bitter, exhausted and aged, weary from battles old and new, physical and emotional. It drifts from active muscle movement into a slower, slack expression, empty, devoid of affect, and Torb’s face looks hollow and vacant as the two old friends assess each other -
All their moments recently have been like this.

The engineer stuffs his hands into his black - wretched, mournful black - suit pockets, sighing heavily, “Glad we managed to get them buried together. I can’t believe they were gonna bury them apart.”

They’ve had this conversation before.

They’ve had this conversation many times now.

...Has it only been a week since Watchpoint: Geneva collapsed?

They’ve had this conversation for endless moments of emotional voids and wretched, mournful abysses of heavy grief.

They’ve had this conversation before.

“Indeed. We will have to thank Isabella and Marianne again. Perhaps we can get Winston to sponsor a trip for them to visit Gibraltar,” Reinhardt replies slowly, heavily. This wretched, mournful abyssal suit weighs heavier than any armor he’s ever worn. Torbjörn just grunts a soft, noncommittal nonresponse, a signal that this particular repetition of the conversation they’ve had far too many times is over.

The world is far too cheerful for today: colors are bright, too bright, so bright; sounds are harsh, so harsh, too harsh; words are peculiar, so peculiar, too peculiar. The light -

The light of the sun is so hard on his eye.

Arlington is as beautiful as they said it would be in the fall - the grass remains green and lush, but the trees have dipped into their regal autumn colors of red and gold and amber, cast like burning flames against soft, silk skies, throwing dappled, royal hues over the pale, haunting tombstones, stretching like cruelties across meters and meters and meters. Endless, they seem. Timeless, they seem. The world is somehow both too alive and too dead. There is no breeze here, just the occasional whispering of the wind that feels more like a pained, anguished sigh than any sort of gale.

Reinhardt wishes for clouds. He wishes for rain.

He wishes he could go back eight days and force Jack and Gabe to sit down and talk and maybe, just maybe -

But this is wishful thinking.

He’s had this conversation before - in the yawning, hellish moments in his head, haunted by the grief and emptiness that makes him want to lie down and sleep forever -

Sleep forever beside Ana’s grave in Cairo.

...Has it really only been a week?

“They were always together, even in death,” Torbjörn says, and they’ve -

They’ve had this conversation before.

“A cruel irony… but perhaps this is how they would have wanted it,” the Swedish engineer says, playing his part, continuing the conversation that they’ve had before.
Reinhardt flicks his good eye over the graves, and from beneath the exhausted grief, a small spring of gratitude wells inside him. It had been a complicated, legal mess of phone calls, petitions, and outright begging from the remaining members of Overwatch, from Adawe in Numbani, and from Isabella Reyes and Marianne Morrison to get the two graves placed directly together, but it had been worth the sleepless nights, the long rambling arguments, the heated, furious discussions, and the conversations - looped on repeat like skipping records.

Because it is worth it to see them side-by-side once again, beside each other, one commander to another, beside each other’s soldier, beside each other’s partner.

Beside the one the other had given their life and death to.

It is worth it to see them together -

As they had been in life -

In death.

...Has it only been a week?

Reinhardt shuts his eyes, both the good one and the bad one.

The wretched, mournful sleep calls to him.

He wonders if the grass besides Ana’s grave is soft enough - as soft as the cloudless silk skies - to lull him into endless sleep.

He’s had this conversation before - in his good mind.

His good mind with cracks at the edges and splintering shards of photon shields, breaking and chipping beneath the weight of living while those who once stood behind his barrier died.

There will be no more long nights of songs and laughter and admittedly too much alcohol.

There will be no more smoky, coarse jokes and thunderstorm laughter and the soft tittering of she who humored them all too much.

There will be no more battles won by the skin of their teeth and the grit of their hearts and the sheer, raw, terrible greatness that they made together.

There will be no more conversations they’ve had before.

But this is a conversations he’s had before, with himself.

He’s had this conversation with himself for the last two years.

Ever since they gave Ana a hollow grave in Cairo.

He’s had another conversation with himself, a parallel one.

A conversation that he would live without her, without her gentle touches and golden smiles and wry, dry humor and dark keen eyes, so perfect to him. He would take those beautiful, mischievous dark eyes over any others any day.

He would give his one good eye to see them one more time -
And then let himself fall into wretched, mournful darkness.

But he’d held that conversation with himself that he would live without her, that as long as the rest of his family was alive, he would continue to protect them, as he always had. His fight was not over so long as they were alive.

But now, but now -

Two of his brothers are dead.

And how long -

How long before his shield shatters and the third goes with them into that wretched, mournful abyss?

He’s had this conversation before.

Has it only been a week?

Reinhardt is supposed to say his next line to Torbjörn - some paltry line about how “Zhey were not very close before zheir deaths” - but he cannot say it. It rings empty and abyssal in his wretched, mournful good mind.

They’ve had this conversation before -

“How long?”

This is a new conversation.

Reinhardt can practically feel the shift in mood radiate off Torbjörn beside him, but Reinhardt -

He’s not processing anything anymore.

His good mind has laid down to sleep beside her grave, far away in Cairo.

“How long before I bury you too?”

Torb’s hand is immediately on his. Reinhardt has poked fun at his friend’s - his brother’s - short stature, but today, today especially, Torbjörn’s hand feels so small against his, but the engineer’s skin is thick and calloused from his dangerous, temperamental work -

“Don’t be sayin’ that!” Torbjörn says, but his sounds are harsh, his words are peculiar, and Reinhardt feels -

His shield shatters.

He collapses to his knees before the graves of two dead brothers.

“Don’t you say that,” Torbjörn says, moving in to hug him, but they are -

They are both shattered.

“I am ze eldest,” Reinhardt chokes on his own words, too bright and too harsh and too peculiar, “Yet here I am - burying zhose younger than me once again. I should have been ze first to go!”

“Don’t say that,” Torbjörn says, but his words are weak - they ring empty and abyssal against the beauty of the world around them.
“I was supposed to protect zhem, Torb!” Reinhardt whispers, but his words break, “I was supposed to be zheir shield.”

“You did what you could. We both did. They… it was an accident, Reinhardt. A terrible accident,” Torbjörn’s words are empty and abyssal against the crushing weight of living.

“Zhey should be buried together,” Reinhardt sobs back, “We should all be buried together.”

Watchpoint: Geneva was perhaps the most central location for what should have been their cemetery. Watchpoint: Montreal was the closest thing they would ever call home. Watchpoint: Grand Mesa was by far the most beautiful - full of sweeping vistas and soft silk skies and trees that burned red and gold and amber in the fall. Watchpoint: Gibraltar, though, was the Watchpoint of hope, of endless seas and endless sunsets over endless seas, where light and water bled perfect colors in the endless horizon, where eternity meets itself.

Any of these should be their cemetery.

Any of these should bury them all beneath rubble and concrete and rebar and smoke and explosions.

Any of these should be where the conversations they’ve had before go to die, buried alongside musical long nights and smoky, thunderstorm, tittering jokes and battles won from hearts that made greatness -

Torbjörn’s prosthetic hand pats his back as reassuringly as he can, but Reinhardt can feel the engineer shudder quietly in his arms.

He did not think he had any more tears

But he was wrong about that.

Has it really only been a week?

The conversation dies into bright colors, harsh sounds, and peculiar words -

Unspoken into the empty abyss.

His shattered mind lays down in the shattered earth.

It has only been a week.

--------

Mirror, tell me something,

Tell me who's the loneliest of all?

Fear of what's inside of me;

Tell me can a heart be turned to stone?

--------
There’s screaming that surprises him, and Mako -

The Crusader is screaming, just screaming, as he rips them out of the stability of existence across time and cobbled streets, past the incline, past the defensive archway, to the far northwestern corner of the Castle’s outer road. And Mako -

Mako is screaming -

Pressed up against the length of a massive hammer that somehow keeps him pinned under sheer rocketing pressure as they tear across time and space and existence, across the deep red sands and green-grey scrub and bleeding Omnic oils of his mind -

Reinhardt fucking slams Mako against an enceinte wall, just to the right of an open doorway, and Mako feels his already damaged right shoulder joint snap and pop out of place, his spine cracking and creaking as the cold rock slams against his skin. It takes him a full second to breathe, gasping, shredding air through his mask into his mouth and nostrils, gasping, gasping, and it takes him another full second to realize that the pressure of hammer and rocket has been removed from his chest, and even though Mako is still trying to breathe -

He lifts his left hand, clutching his hook, instinctively, running only on old habits -

There’s the screeching of metal grating on metal as the heft of the hammer catches in the hook.

Even though Mako is still trying to think -

His old instincts push back.

He’s forcing Reinhardt - hammer and shield and all - backwards away from him, and then though it hurts like a motherfucker, Mako lifts his right hand at the elbow-joint and fires a shotgun blast right at the Crusader’s chest. Colors and sounds and smells are starting to swim back into the desert of his consciousness and he sees Reinhardt jerk back slightly as the shotgun puts a sizable dent into that white-plated armor -

In that split second, Mako is reacting.

He clips his hook back to his belt and in a flash, his left hand is pressing against his right shoulder and Mako braces himself -

His left hand puts rocketing pressure on his right shoulder and there’s a flash of red red red red pain -

And then his scarred, torn right shoulder is back in its joint, back where it should be. Injured and weak, but still together.

And he’s automatically lifting his right arm - now back together again - towards Reinhardt’s head -

There’s a bang, but the pellets and nuts and bolts smash into a shimmering blue glow, cracking instantaneously, but it’s enough to get Reinhardt, good eye glaring at him fiercely, to move back a little bit further, and Mako takes that momentary spacing to crack open his makeshift shotgun and

Survivor: Move the Payload

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:12 p.m. - Northwestern corner of the Castle Road leading to Eichenwalde Keep
stuff it full of more pellets and nuts and bolts from his pack.

“...Did you make zhat yourself?”

Now that -

That surprises Mako.

The calm, almost jovial tone to the words sparks something in him, and even as he once against hefts his hook in his left hand, Mako is looking up at the old Crusader with almost pleasant confusion. Reinhardt grins at him broadly, cheerfully, from behind the shimmering blue shield. The glow makes him look like he’s speaking to Mako from behind a rippling, glowing waterfall -

“...I did, with the help of a… an associate,” Mako grunts, as he fires another short-range shot against the shield. Even though it cracks further, Reinhardt lets out a booming laugh, setting off into a strange side-step to his left (Mako’s right), and Mako rotates to the opposite side, trying to maintain some distance from that hammer. His shotgun has both short and “long” range and he will do everything in his struggling senses to keep it that way -

“Zhat is very impressive!” Reinhardt compliments him, before grinning again, “Brigitte would probably love to see it!”

“...Is that your smith there?” Mako grunts, about to hurl his hook when -

Reinhardt drops his shield, simultaneously twisting his hammer in his hands and a burst of rocketing heat blasts out of the back end of the head and Mako -

He manages to twist away in time, but the heatwave ripples against his stomach and fucking hell, it burns like nothing else, not even the worst, boiling, blistering sunburn he’s ever had could compare -

He’s gonna need to take a breather soon, very soon.

Mako hurls the hook but it -

“Indeed!” Reinhardt states cheerfully, as his shield returns in the blink of an eye, his hook clattering against it uselessly. The Crusader gives him another broad smile before laughing loudly, “Ahahaha, I do LIVE for these moments, friend! To fight another old soldier on zhees hallowed battleground - it does a greater honor to my comrades zhan anything else!”

Mako is still trying to focus but -

The shield in his mind shatters.

“And defending a fucking Bastion?!” he snaps at the old warrior as he fires another shot against the shield. Reinhardt’s photon barrier shatters and crumbles under the weight of the blast and the weight of his words and -

Mako hurls the hook as he roars, “Is that fucking honor, Wilhelm?”

Even though Reinhardt attempts to jump to the side, the hook catches on a massive plate of armor, and Mako digs his heels into the dusty, rotting limestone blocks, and pulls -

Mako is lifting the shotgun to Reinhardt’s exposed face, which is -

Which is smiling fiercely, eyes lit with a strange flashing glow, like lightning strikes across a grey summer sky, bright and blasting and -
The head of the hammer glows menacingly -

A fucking arrow - will that fucking archer just fuck off? - hits the ground by their feet and splits again and Mako jerks the chain to snap a quick barrier against the stinging shrapnel, but it’s too late, he feels pure, rocketing force slam into his right side and he’s flung to his left, sideways, back towards the south, towards the defensive arch as Reinhardt roars something - there’s the cracking of some of his ribs and his whole right side ribbons with smacking pain, but behind the mask -

Mako grits his teeth, digging his feet into the ground, sliding to a stop just a short ways, firing the “long range” trigger of his shotgun -

He’s rewarded with a slight yell of pain from Reinhardt, but the Crusader bellows it into words:

“Ze Bastion is an old soldier too!”

“The Bastion is your fucking enemy!” Mako roars back as he hurls the hook again - he’s going to drag the traitor into the deep red sands of his hell - but Reinhardt is still moving, moving shockingly fast for someone who’s like sixty something, once again torquing his hammer in his hands to hurl another blast of heat towards the survivalist.

But Mako is ready this time.

Mako - also surprisingly light on his feet - dances backwards as the heat blast down towards the gate wall, and there are shrieks of surprise from behind him, but Mako doesn’t care, the fury has claimed him, drenching the deep red sands and green-grey scrubs and soft skies in his mind in blood and oil, and he’s -

“Fucking traitor,” Mako howls, firing his last round at Reinhardt, who clinks up an only partially-formed shield in time against the smattering of pellet shrapnel and burning nuts and bolts. They’re waltzing and moving in an intense, militant pattern in the northwest corner of the road, right where the southern incline meets the eastern bridge - the bridge to the Castle proper, the last stretch of the road and -

“All peaceful beings deserve a chance!” Reinhardt roars at him and Mako gets a split-second to see the rockets on his back flare to life -

But that’s all the time Mako needs to focus -

He lifts his hook in his left hand and the butt of his gun in his right as Reinhardt hurtles towards him -

Hammer slams against hook and gun as the old Crusader propels them both, pushing Mako backwards and rocketing himself forward.

They’re at a slight angle, so they hit the corner of the defensive archway, right where it connects with the western buttress supporting it, and even though the pressure is still pushing heavily against him, Mako fights it, wrestling against the weight of the hammer’s heft even as his back is literally pushed into a corner.

“...Ze Omnic Crisis es over, soldier,” Reinhardt says to him softly, as soft as the silk skies above them, his good eye is glazed over with -

With sadness -

And Mako -
“The war is never over,” Mako snarls at him, even as they’re locked, hook-to-hammer, in a strange grapple, and the old Crusader just shakes his head serenely, murmuring with surprising tenderness, “My friend, the Omnic Crisis es over, but ze war - ze war for zees world continues. Eet es endless, timeless -

“Eet es ze war for justice.”

“. . .Cocky words coming from someone who made that bloody City of Harmony,” Mako grunts, “No fucking wonder Talon blew Geneva to shit - Overwatch lost everything that made it great in its senility -”

Reinhardt’s eyes transform from sadness to fierce, thunderous sharpness and the hammer begins to flare with heat -

“MOVE, MR. WILHELM,” comes a shout from above them and both old soldiers look up at -

That fucking archer is popping over the side of the defensive arch, arrow pointed straight at Mako’s head -

Reinhardt relaxes just a tiny bit -

Suddenly, the archer turns to his right, shouting something incoherently as several small explosions pop around him and Mako -

The explosions don’t surprise Mako.

About damn time.

Several of the small frag grenades bounce over the side of the defensive arch, falling seemingly perfectly next to Reinhardt, and the old Crusader roars as he jumps back, away from Mako, who is about to bolt down to that doorway he’d popped out of only a minute ago when -

Something stings sharply into his left side and fucking fuck -

Mako tilts his head down to the left, where a small series of stairs run up from an underground tunnel and sees the fucking Shrike standing there, half a meter below him, shifting their biotic rifle back into position, their screenglass face flickering slightly. There’s a huge dart sticking out his lower left back and -

The wave of numbness and exhaustion hits him like a fucking explosion.

The last thing he feels is himself falling to the right -

Falling into the deep red sands and green-grey scrub of his mind -

--------

Mirror, mirror, what’s behind you?

Save me from the things I see!

I can keep it from the world -

Why won’t you let me hide from me?
The sudden appearance of the European Defensive squad spurs all of them into action.

Satya immediately crafts another photon barrier as the medical sniper moves out of the way, into cover behind the partially-standing cut-stone rubble wall. The Bastion moves in to replace her position, firing machine gun bullets at the squad, who scream and duck behind the battering ram.

But Brigitte -

Brigitte is hammering some hunk of heated metal onto a piece of lightweight chest armor.

In a flash, the smith is done, holding up the rather large chestplate in Satya’s direction and snapping, “Here.” The Vishkar architech blinks slightly before saying, “I don’t need -”

“You are wearing like three pieces of cloth over your heart,” Brigitte hisses, shaking the armor piece slightly, “Put the damn thing on.”

Satya complies.

She clips her photon projector to its magnetic holster before taking the chestplate from the smith’s hands and even though it’s several sizes too large for her, she snaps it on over her shoulders and ribs, cinching some of the belts to make it fit more snugly. Satya turns to Brigitte, murmuring, “Thank you,” but the small smith is already hammering out another piece of metal onto a second chest plate.

“Satya, sniper, drive off that damn junker below us - we need to get to the other side to help Rein,” Brigitte explains sharply, though her focus never leaves her small forge, and she flips the chestplate over to begin bolting another piece of metal on the backside. Satya nods, sending out another barrier to protect the Bastion, before she turns to the small staircase on their west. There are still a few small frag explosions going off below them, and Satya takes a deep breath -

Before she jumps into the staircase.

Immediately, she has a sentry turret in her hands, sticking it to the corner of the doorway. The moment it’s placed, her hands are moving, dancing, weaving another one into hard-light existence. She quickly darts across the landing and sticks it to the other side - this will give them some measure of protection should they need to retreat back to the stairs.

Behind her, the medical sniper slinks down the stairs.

Without warning, a small frag grenade pops in between them, bouncing along with surprising cheer and merriment as it explodes in a small burst, the shrapnel going everywhere. Satya and the sniper flinch back into their respective corners, but they are not daunted -

“I will project a barrier for us,” Satya informs the sniper, who nods. The Vishkar architech pauses for a moment before adding, “When the junker is scared off, please go help Herr Wilhelm.”

The sniper nods again.
Satya takes another deep breath, calming the bright colors and harsh sounds, peculiar words and hard light in her head -

And then she softens them, weaving them into a mesh photon barrier in her left compact hand -

And she emerge from behind the corner, sending it down the hallway.

The little frag grenades bounce against it uselessly.

Satya darts after it, unclipping her photon projector and firing off several blasts as the sniper follows up behind her, shooting darts towards the end of the hallway. The lithe, lean junker is hunkered down in a corner, giggling madly to himself as he pops off several more small bombs, but his expression of glee shifts to confusion as the barrier appears, followed immediately by two individuals who don’t look that dangerous -

But the sounds of the photon projector can be haunting to those it is turned on.

As if in time-dilated motion, the junker rises -

Satya switches to beam mode.

A strand of light - raw hard center, edged with softness, but burning with violent intensity - bursts from the end of the photon projector and immediately seeks out the infrared of the junker’s skin. It slips through the hard-light barrier and snaps to his torso, causing him to shriek slightly as the radiation sizzles into him and he -

He hurls something at them, up over the barrier, into the space between Satya and the sniper and -

He clicks something -

A much bigger, much more painful blast rips into the air between them and Satya screams as the red red red red heat flares up and licks across her skin, burning and burning and burning and the junker hobbles off to the eastern door of the hallway -

There’s a crashing sound and a bright, golden glow briefly fills the air -

Satya feels sudden relief as the aerosolized nanobots and healing liquid sink into her skin.

She fires one last long-range blast into the eastern doorway, before turning around and rushing back to the western half.

“Thank you,” Satya says to the sniper as they regroup on their landing. She forms another sentry turret and places it on the other side of the southern door, as Brigitte and the Bastion pop down the stairs.

“We did what we could,” Brigitte says quickly, eyes darting to the different sentry turret positions, “But they’re quickly gaining ground. Rein needs our help now -“

Immediately, without waiting for her to finish her sentence, the medical sniper is rushing up the far side of the small landing to the northern steps.

“...We’re going to have to give up this tunnel,” Brigitte says to Satya as the Bastion follows the sniper. The smith looks at her seriously, muttering, “It’s too hard to defend all these networks.”

“That will leave us at risk for the junker to flank us from this side,” Satya replies, looking at her small turrets. Brigitte shakes her head as they move to the stairs themselves, sighing, “It can’t be helped.
Can you place more turrets on this stairway? That will give us time to fight back if they come up from below."

“I will do what I can,” Satya begins, but they stop because there’s a small jam at the northern doorway and from around the Bastion, Satya can see that the medical sniper is pointing a small pistol up at something -

There’s shouting and several small explosions from up above -

Satya begins weaving another Sentry Turret.

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Mirror, mirror, tell me something,
Who's the loneliest of all?

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相続人 (Sozokujin): Stop the Payload

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:12 p.m. - On the Western Buttress of the Defensive Arch

Hanzo had felt only mild surprise when Reinhardt had rocketed off to the north, taking the pigman with him.

...I did not know humans could move that fast, Ao says inside him as the two dragons watch the Crusader with reptilian looks of awe and admiration on their faces. Hanzo rolls his eyes at them, firing off another arrow to the southwest, where it pierces another European Defensive member in the neck. He’s managing to pick them off steadily, dropping their numbers from the ten or so that he counted at the beginning (although he believes some are still hiding out in the eastern bailey). They’re not very well-trained, constantly alternating their attention between the Bastion, Brigitte’s turret (when it had been standing), and himself, although some of them had managed to clip him a few times.

A situation quickly and unerringly remedied by the medical sniper firing several darts into his shoulder.

As much as Hanzo did not want to rely on the others, they were being surprisingly effective at maintaining some level of teamwork.

Although Reinhardt blasting off to the north had quickly broken their formation.

Hanzo, however, is grateful. He’d turned his attention to the pigman a fraction of a second too late, and the damn hog had blasted Satya with a faceful of shotgun pellets and probably would’ve killed her with a second shot if it hadn’t been for the… speedy intervention of Reinhardt.

Giving up formation to keep people alive is always important, though it may cost them dearly in the long run.
...Hanzo is not above grabbing his employer and fleeing the battle entirely to keep her alive.

Fortunately, they are killing off European Defensive members - Hanzo had watched Brigitte drop two of them by the hole in the Gate, and the Bastion had been doing a good job of keeping the squad members pinned down for Hanzo to pick off the semi-exposed ones in the far southeastern corners. Now that the European Defensive members had destroyed Brigitte’s turret and the hogman had forced the Bastion to move positions, the remaining UED squad - about five of them, by Hanzo’s count - had rallied around their hovering battering ram and moved it up to the southwestern corner.

They’re pushing the hover carrier past the freestanding limestone rubble when the Bastion unleashes a rain of submachine gunfire on them as Hanzo notches another arrow.

He pulls back on the drawstring, feeling his focus narrow in on the UED leader’s head -

Suddenly, something smashes into the corner of the western battlement and rattles the whole damn thing -

Hanzo immediately jerks his attention north and downward, peering over the side with the arrow still notched and tensed -

Reinhardt has the pigman locked in an awkward grapple beneath him, wedging the hammer up against his massive frame. In a surprisingly commendable effort, the pigman is pushing back with only that large hook and the butt of his odd junker shotgun, hefting back against Reinhardt’s force with a fierce strength of his own -

There are low levels of furious conversation going on between them but Hanzo -

Hanzo has no patience for this.

“MOVE, MR. WILHELM,” the archer roars down at them, and Ao and Sora stir with their spiritual bloodlust as Hanzo jerks the arrow straight to the pigman’s head -

Both the old Crusader and the masked junker look up at him and -

Several small explosions blast around him.

“糞 (tn: shit)!“ Hanzo shouts, as he jerks back, firing the arrow wildly towards the eastern half of the defensive arch. He can’t see who’s firing at him, but he suspects it’s that thin, spindly junker with all the bombs -

What a regular detective, Sora snorts, and Hanzo growls back, I do not have time for your sarcasm! Several more bombs bounce and ping around him, blasting and exploding and searing into his skin, peppering him with small bits of frag and shrapnel. They seem to be bouncing at random, but somehow they make perfect angles to reach him, although some of them fall over the side and explode close to Reinhardt, causing the Crusader to yelp and move away from the pigman -

Hanzo backs away to the farthest section of the western battlement he can manage, reaching for a scatter arrow to fire back and hopefully drive the junker out of his hiding spot -

“Hanzo!”

He glances down the south side of the battlement, looking at Brigitte who is hiding behind the short limestone wall and the Bastion. The smith has her small forge packed up on her back again, and both her and the Bastion are being pushed back by rifle fire from the UED members -
The smith holds up a strange roll of cloth and metal -

“Catch!”

She hurls it up at him - it unfurls slightly in the air, but it’s just close enough for Hanzo to snap out his left hand and grab it. He assesses it for a quick second - it’s a semi-reinforced chestplate, with homemade orange-ish scrap metal added onto the front and back - and quickly sets his bow down. In a flash, he straps the chestplate on, leaving it loose enough to make room for his quiver still - but he tightens some of the slack around his ribs so that it won’t shift around too much.

Despite all this, Hanzo makes a small grimace as he grabs the storm bow again.

Genji used to laugh at his decision to go without protective armoring, even when they were young. His little brother used to say that Hanzo was so stupid, that it was suicidal to go on missions without any armor, and Hanzo used to scoff, saying that his distance protected him more than anything - that it made sense for Genji, a close-range fighter, to wear chestplates to protect himself, but all Hanzo needed was a clean shot and his victim would never even know -

His brother’s mocking, happy laughter rings like a cracked furin bell in his mind, the sound hollow and distorted in the summer storm winds -

You just do not want to wear armor because then you would have to wear both sleeves, Ao retorts and Sora chuckles, I still do not understand why he -

**FREEDOM. OF. MOVEMENT**, Hanzo seethes at them, but the dragons howl with laughter in his mind, even though they’ve had this conversation a million times before - Hanzo hates when his shoulders feel restricted, he hates struggling against flapping and twisting cloth, he hates the feeling of fabric against his left wrist and -

He’s reaching back for a scatter arrow when movement by the hole in the Gate catches his eye -

Ao, sonar, he states to the dragon, and immediately their laughter stops. Ao snaps to attention and dissolves in his mind, but he feels the dragon’s energy attach itself to his arrow. Hanzo notches it, draws it tense, focuses on the gate in a split second, and then fires.

The arrow, with Ao attached, sticks into the still-standing part of the gate and ripples out with energy and -

ああ神 (tn: oh god)!
There’s a second squadron - this time of five people - approaching the hole in the Gate and -

Wait, no, there’s a sixth person making up the rear of the squadron -

Hanzo freezes.

Something large, massive, hulking, and incredibly dangerous pings on Hanzo’s senses through Ao and he feels both dragons shudder under the oppressive weight of the threat’s mere existence and -

Hanzo nearly gags as his entwined senses with Ao fill his head with the bitter metallic taste of ash and blood, as the smell of smoke and burning human flesh fogs his brain, as a strange flickering of black and red-gold-amber burns into his mind and -

Impossible.

What is a **death god doing here**??
It’s not the Reaver, Ao says with fear and pain as he floods back into Hanzo’s mind and wraps himself around Hanzo’s heart beside his twin.

Impossible, Hanzo coughs, There are no other known death god assassins on the black market right now.

Someone has made a new one, Sora states and Hanzo responds, The United European Defensive has made a new death god?? But for what purpose??

...Could it be why they are here to take Balderich’s armor? Ao asks and Hanzo scowls as he pulls another arrow from his quiver, muttering internally, But that... thing already has armor, why would they come take armor that is thirty years old and certainly rusting away -?

Suddenly, and shockingly close, a harsh, grating Australian accent screams out:

“FIRE IN DA HOLE!”

Hanzo tears his attention from the darkness impeding on his senses, jerking his only partially-focused arrow to his left as a fucking tire rips itself up and over the defensive archway’s crenellations and out into the air above the Defender group and fuck -

Hanzo fires the arrow at the bizarre, mechanical wheel, but he hasn’t drawn it to full power, so the arrow pierces it but does not slow its roll and -

“SATYA, SHIELD UP,” Hanzo roars as the tire falls and just north of him, the small cluster of Defenders, regrouping in the Northwestern corner, all jerk their heads upwards and -

The mechanized tire jerks into the middle of them in a strange motion and -

It explodes -

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Schild: Stop the Payload

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:13 p.m. - just north of the Western Buttress of the Defensive Archway

He manages to tilt his shield - still partially recovering - upwards at just the right angle -

At just the right time.

Across from him, in the landing of the stairs, Satya projects her own barrier up at an angle, covering herself and the Bastion and -

The Bastion moves to block her anyways and -

Brigitte and the medical sniper dive beside him in time, as the unwieldy mechanized tire thing explodes in a blast of heat and jagged metal bits and pieces that rip into all of them, shattering his struggling photon barrier. The poor lion-shield takes the brunt of the force, preventing them from what is probably death for Brigitte and the medical sniper and near-death for him, but flames of heat and burning shrapnel tear into his plated armor with the force of a Gatling gun, and though he is protecting his face with his shield arm, Reinhardt feels several pieces pierce into the weak parts of his armor -
Including where the other junker had caused a dented weakness just a moment ago with his strange, scrap shotgun.

He grits his teeth as the flash and sharp needling pain nearly white out his vision - he hears Brigitte shout something incoherently, hiding behind her own small shield, and for a strange, ringing second -

He thinks -

He wouldn’t dare to believe -

But he thinks he hears Ana.

Reinhardt is not sure if the cry - small and sharp and fierce and furious - is even real or just a fragment of his memories, haunting him as all his ghosts do, lurking in the brightly colored shadows of his mind, calling to him from the soft grass beside her grave -

He feels the medical sniper, ducking behind him, grip a part of his back plating and jab something small and sharp and fierce into a joint in his armor, through his Kevlar, into his right side.

Immediately, golden, liquid life floods into his veins as the healing nanobots and biotic fluid enter his system, surging through him with stem cells and proteins and platelets and everything Ana and Jack ever explained to him about the seemingly magical healing abilities of the little robots.

The sniper darts away briefly to hurl a biotic grenade at the ground in between all of them, and Reinhardt feels further relief as the additional healing cools and soothes the burning parts of his face, the pierced parts of his skin -

Bits of rubber and metal sheeting and odd ends and pieces clatter down all around them, and as his skewed vision recovers the colors of the ancient stone and the swaying plants and the blue soft skies -

He watches as the Bastion falls to its side.

“NO,” Satya is screaming as she dives to it, but in a flash, Brigitte is by them, slinging her small forge forward and cracking it open. Reinhardt’s chest swells with a surge of pride as she starts pulling little scraps of metal together and cranking the heat on the forge’s core, and -

The Bastion is moving, but in a peculiar way, lifting a little soldering tool to parts of its head and neck joint as Brigitte begins speaking to it:

“No, no, use your fusion welder on the crucial parts - you work on your core, I’ll fix your metal plating. Torb never taught me about Omnic cores, so you have to work on that part, okay? But I can fix up the rest of you just fine, I know Bastion units pretty well, and we’ll work on making sure all your joints are okay after the battle, alright? You’re going to be okay.” Brigitte murmurs to it comfortably, and the Bastion’s little fusion welder moves to a different part of its head, sending out little sparks and flakes of metal as it pushes pieces back together. Satya still looks concerned but Brigitte just continues calmly, “Satya, turrets. I’ll help it, don’t worry, start placing your turrets.”

Satya glances up at her, and then an intense look of determination settles on her perfect features and she nods deeply before -

THE JUNKER.

Reinhardt whips around to where the large, masked junker had been tranquilized by the medical sniper but he’s -
He’s gone.

The Crusader looks up just in time to see the rest of his heavy frame disappear into the western doorway of the bailey building and -

*Mein Gott*

There are five UED members pushing the battering ram directly towards them. Well, only two are actually moving the thing, the other three are lifting their rifles directly at him and -

“Satya!” Reinhardt bellows, attempting to flick his shield to life but the lion refuses - tired and exhausted from overuse, he knows from instinct and old habit alone that it will be another few seconds before the shield is fully regenerated, he can practically feel the small fusion core humming as it recovers but it won’t be fast enough -

A silky, shimmering blue mesh passes through and around him and Reinhardt’s hair prickles with static as it moves across him. Beside him, the medical sniper flinches as well and -

Satya’s barrier absorbs the rifle fire that pepper across it, and -

On pure instinct and old habits alone -

Reinhardt twists his hammer in his hands and tears a wave of heat and rocket blast at the UED members on the left side of the battering ram.

They’re so close - only four or five meters - that they hardly have time to react, much less get out of the way.

Reinhardt only has one good eye left -

But it’s enough to see the faces of the two of them burst open and wide and vulnerable in fear -

Before the force and heat of the rocket shot consumes them.

Suddenly, one of the remaining three on the right side drops dead, as an arrow pieces into the side of his head and he collapses on the ground. The two living UED members scream in fear and Reinhardt hefts his hammer as the medical sniper points their rifle at them and -

To their right, Satya is starting to place a number of small white turrets along the edge of the western battlement, a few hidden in narrow places, one under the archway itself and -

Reinhardt takes several steps forward, striding towards the battering ram as the two UED members shriek and twist, tripping over themselves to get away -

Another arrow hits one in the neck and -

Maybe we can do it -

Maybe we will stop them here -

“MR. WILHELM, NO, STOP -”

Hanzo’s voice cracks against the clear, silk-soft skies and, *Was?* (tn:what?)

The next few moments *feel* like they spill out from within Reinhardt’s mind, from behind brightly colored shadows, from behind even the ghosts that lurk among them, from behind even the darkness
that curls behind the ghosts and the stained glass shadows and -

A massive cloud of black smoke - reeking of ash and burning human flesh - engulfs the battering ram, curling around it before reassembling itself on the northern side, only two meters from him. It condenses - first liquefying out of the smoke and then solidifying from the bleeding, ink-drop liquid and then reforming into something massive and humanoid in shape, yet angular and sharp and fierce and terrifying - it is oil-black all over, except in small bits and pieces, at the seams, and in the gaping maw of its armor’s torso -

In all these places, it glows red and gold and amber - flickering like a burning, molten sun and -

Reinhardt freezes -

The obsidian-black armored figure hefts a massive and sharp and fierce hammer in its hands, turning it over once-twice before it levels its red-gold-amber gaze, burning out like a laser from behind its eerie helmet -

Reinhardt’s shield is not ready.

It is close -

But it is not ready.

Based only on instinct and old habits alone -

Reinhardt shoves the medical sniper to his left, trying to be as gentle as he can as he pushes them away.

His instincts and old habits have already told him what will happen next, before his good mind even has a chance to register it.

The burning molten core in the center of the black knight’s armor releases an otherworldly, high-pitched whistling scream, and the figure kneels slightly before rocketing towards him -

Reinhardt lifts his hammer and braces for -

The Black Knight slams into him, firing both of them backwards into the enceinte wall where he’d pushed the masked junker only moments ago, and for a brief second Reinhardt’s vision nearly whites out again from the sheer force of the impact, cracking into his armor and shoulders and arms, all the way down to his hammer. A split-second later, he feels another dart zip into the side of his neck and there’s the subsequent burst of life and energy inside him. He lifts his watering eyes to the armored helmet and grits his teeth and -

“...Reinhardt?”

The voice that comes out of the helmet sounds like hell - it sounds like nails grating on chalkboards and the cracking of logs in a fire, and a puff of black smoke emits from the mouth piece but the voice cuts through Reinhardt like a knife because -

“EHRHARDT?”

the voice that crackles over the intercomm of their supped up van sounds deeper than he remembers it, but to Reinhardt, the man will always be a small boy, holding Reinhardt’s hand at Balderich’s official funeral service at the end of the Crisis, his mother on his other side. It had been a cloudy day, threatening to pour rain over Stuttgart, but the clouds held out, even as their eyes did not and -
“The UED says they’re going to make me a new offer,” Ehrhardt von Adler’s voice says to them. Reinhardt and Brigitte have set up camp on the Danube outside of Vienna, and they’re listening to the thirty-six-year-old Ehrhardt talk about some sort of odd promotion, but his voice is cutting in and out over the comms and -

...Had that only been eight months ago?

They’ve locked hammers against each other and Reinhardt is struggling to search that glowing obsidian helmet for answers and -

“Töte mich.”

The brightly colored shadows of Reinhardt’s mind crack and shatter and fall into the earth.

*Kill me.*

“Töte mich bitte.”

*Kill me please.*

...His shattered mind rises from the shattered earth -

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*I’m the loneliest of all.*

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Chapter End Notes

Hey so, remember that part waaaay back in the introduction when I said that anything in the game could be canon to Old Habits?
Meet "Blackhardt."

Me like four months ago: haha wouldn't it be terrifying if there was a character like Reinhardt but he had Reaper's powers?
Me: ...oh shiii -

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So Ehrhardt von Alder was made. I know Ehrhardt is a surname but I wanted something that stuck with the "hardt" theme.
Overwatch: Eichenwalde - The Payload is Approaching a Checkpoint

Chapter Summary

[[The Black Knight] has joined the game.]

[The Payload is Approaching a Checkpoint.]

Chapter Notes

Song is "Arsonist's Lullaby" by Hozier (Youtube)

(P.S. - for my fellow nerds, be on the look out for a secret song link!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: The Payload is Approaching a Checkpoint

When I was a child, I heard voices
Some would sing and some would scream
You'll soon find you have few choices
I learned the voices died with me

When I was a child I'd sit for hours
Staring into open flames
Something in it had a power
Could barely tear my eyes away

All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep them on a leash
She watches in slow motion horror as his massive, white-plated frame is ripped away from her, rocketing northward out of control as the Black Knight pins him down -

They slam bodily against a stone wall, right on the edge of a doorway to some sort of storage room -

Ana moves on instinct and old habits alone.

She lifts her biotic rifle and snaps the zoom, pulling the trigger to tag a dart to Reinhardt’s barely exposed neck. In her focus, she can see a look of horrific confusion bloom across Reinhardt’s face and faintly she hears some German words being exchanged and then -

Reinhardt outright glares.

She has not seen him this angry in decades.

And, in a pure reversal of what just happened -

Reinhardt is suddenly blasting past her again, dragging the Black Knight along with him as they rush to the battering ram -

“GET ACROSS ZE BRIDGE,” the Crusader screams at them as he flies past and suddenly Ana perceives it with crystal clarity -

We might lose this.

...We might all die here.

From where she has been placing turrets along the Western Buttress, Satya shoots forward another photon barrier and darts across the cobbled street to where Ana is standing. Directly across from Ana, Brigitte snaps the case of her mobile forge shut and also bolts to the sniper’s position, followed by the recovering Bastion moving as quickly as its joint legs will carry it.

Ana tilts her rifle towards the battering ram again, aiming for another weak spot in Rein’s armor when -

Oh fuck.

There are six UED members on the battering ram.

There’s the terrifying Black Knight.
She has *no idea* where the two junkers are.

Hanzo is staring down at her from atop the Western Buttress, looking ill -

The archer bolts eastward across the Defensive Arch, crouching slightly as he rushes it but -

As if on cue, several more small frag grenades burst out from *somewhere* on the top of the Eastern half of the Defensive Arch, and Hanzo just -

Leaps off the side of the Arch.

He slams and rolls across the cut-stone ground, but there’s a flash of pain on his face and he rises with a slight wobble and -

She fires a dart at him, snagging him in his exposed arm and Hanzo nods to her before whipping around and firing another scatter arrow towards the battering ram. It hits the pavement and splits, causing the new UED members to shriek and howl, and even the Black Knight shudders slightly, pausing just enough for Reinhardt to take several steps backwards towards their position -

Reinhardt’s lion shield flickers to shimmering, shivering blue life, just as return rifle fire smatters against it.

Suddenly, a small frag grenade explodes dangerously close to her and *oh fuck* -

Junkrat’s launcher can reach the bridge from wherever he’s hiding.

Ana fires another dart to Reinhardt’s shoulder joint before snapping several more into her rifle as she turns to rush down the bridge to the Castle Gate, massive and solid and *imposing*. Satya is placing a new small white turret in a scrub brush and pile of rubble by one of the bridge’s defensive crenellations, and Ana somehow manages to see that there are others dotting the bridge, all partially or even mostly hidden behind cobbles or weeds.

Up ahead, the Bastion has slotted itself into a series of broken battlements and mortared stone walls on the far north of the bridge, and Ana notes that Brigitte is beside it, hammering metal sheets along its shoulder joints and head panels -

Brigitte smacks the regular arm of the Bastion approvingly and the Bastion bweeps cheerfully before turning itself back into a turret. It pauses a moment, waiting for Ana and Hanzo to cross the bridge and -

Ana whips back around, gesturing to Hanzo and then to Reinhardt, who is still on the other side, backing up slowly towards them as the Black Knight blasts a wave of smoke and heat before its hammer reassembles in its hands -

“**MR. WILHELM,**” Hanzo shouts, notching another arrow and firing through the crenellations to the battering ram, before practically screaming, “**FALL BACK, REINHARDT.**”

Another explosion bursts beside them and Ana has to pull Hanzo to the side - his arrow whizzes by a UED member’s head wildly due to her interference, but Hanzo doesn’t seem to mind -

In a split second, they’re both rushing back to the Castle Gate alongside Satya, who is moving *southward* for some reason and -

Ana clears the bridge, reaching where the Bastion and Brigitte have holed themselves up among freestanding cut-limestone ruins, near a narrow, northern door into the Castle proper and -
“MS. VASWANI,” Hanzo shouts as he too is moving south across the Castle’s landing to where she’s placing a few more turrets along a semi-standing stone structure and -

A massive figure appears from around the corner, jerking that stout shotgun right towards her face.

Hanzo is lifting his arrow to Roadhog’s head -

Ana is snapping the focus of her rifle towards him and -

Satya lifts her photon projector as the three turrets around him blast into life -

They direct piercing blue lasers straight into his skin, as Satya’s photon projector also shoots another long, hard-light laser right into his chest and the sheer shock of it causes Roadhog to jerk and twitch and spasm in surprise, pulling the shotgun into the air and firing off a blast useless to the sky. With startling speed, the junker jolts away, retreating back into the darkness of another door, as several more small frag grenades bounce out from it.

Hanzo rushes to Satya, snapping his free right hand to her compact arm and pulling her bodily back, back to their northern corner and -

We’re getting penned in.

Satya had the right idea and the foresight to try and block off access from the southern door, but even though she’s stuffed the turrets into small corners and hiding spots, they’ll be easily destroyed once Roadhog regains his bearings - and probably huffs more Bio-fluid, Ana thinks - and then they’ll be pinned in from two angles, the south and the west, and -

THE BRIDGE.

Ana once again directs all her attention to Reinhardt, who is squared up on the western end of the bridge but -

The Black Knight is flinging and twisting his hammer wildly, as Reinhardt blocks one blow with his own hammer, but he barely manages to step out of the way of a second, terrible strike and Ana -

Her stomach drops into the depths below.

“REINHARDT,” Brigitte shrieks at him, as the battering ram, the UED group, the Black Knight, and the old Crusader - her knight, her soldier, her beautiful, shimmering shield and protector - round into the northwest corner of the road. And Ana -

Though she does not feel ready -

Though she does not feel worthy -

She rushes back out onto the bridge, firing dart after dart into the weak joints of his armor, watching his back-and-forth struggle as each blow from the Black Knight’s hammer causes him to falter, but each healing dart renews his energy. His own swings are wild but hold a strange grace to them - he handles them with more care and focus than the obsidian monster, his strikes are more precise but -

He’s being swarmed, by UED rifle shots, by the Black Knight’s hammer, by -

The Black Knight dissolves -

And then reappears in a second on the bridge between them.
Ana screams.

She had screamed earlier too, on accident, when Junkrat’s tire had blown up directly over their heads, but it had been less out of fear and more out of rage and frustration - *how dare that junker destroy his shield, how dare they hurt him* - but this -

*Ana just screams in fear.*

The Black Knight is now physically separating them, though its attention is on Reinhardt, still swinging wildly, but Ana -

She hurls a biotic grenade at the monster before jumping back a meter -

The grenade cracks against the jet-black armor and there’s a horrifying *scream of pain* as the nanobots enter the knight’s skin and nostrils and mouth and they -

They begin cannibalizing its cells.

The Black Knight drops to a knee, the force of the impact shaking the whole bridge and Ana barely keeps her balance as she pulls back to where the small group of defenders is standing and -

The Bastion bweeps loudly and starts *rattling off its Gatling gun* -

*Directly into the obsidian knight’s back.*

“We’re losing,” Brigitte shouts over the clattering din and both Satya and Hanzo look grim. The four humans look amongst each others with pain briefly until Ana points her rifle back to Reinhardt - now that the Black Knight is down on one knee, she has a clear shot of him again, firing a dart into the back of his neck. He’s got his shield up against the rifle fire of the UED members, but he’s being pushed back towards the Black Knight, who is struggling to rise under the Gatling gun fire.

“...I can make a shield generator.”

Satya’s words are calm, but Ana thinks she hears a strange shaking tone to her words.

“It will use much of my current photon charge,” the Vishkar architech continues, “But it will provide all of us a small hard-light barrier. It may help.”

“We need to do everything we can,” Brigitte nods to her, and Satya turns, darting back to the far north corner. A large, white, flowery platform appears in her hands before Satya puts it on the mortared ground. A fraction of a second later, a glowing blue orb appears over it, and another fraction of a second later, a strange static tingle spreads over all of them, and Ana briefly sees a blue sheen ripple across her skin before it clears out.

“It will absorb direct damage,” Satya says, and she’s looking extremely drained from the action, but her beautiful face once again makes a determined expression, “But it is fragile compared to true armor. It will burn up, but restore itself after a moment -”

A loud, horrified bweep is emitted from the Bastion and they all turn -

The Black Knight has transformed into partial smoke and is *gliding towards them*, the slit of its helmet glowing red and *terrible* and -

*All of them scream.*

Brigitte fires her shotgun, the Bastion is firing its Gatling gun, Ana even fires a dart, Hanzo shoots
off an arrow, but all of them pass straight through the monster, and they’re all still screaming as it resolidifies, raising its hammer directly over the Bastion and -

*It is torn out of its position as -

*Reinhardt rockets into it.*

---------

*When I was 16 my senses fooled me  
Thought gasoline was on my clothes  
I knew that something would always rule me  
I knew this scent was mine alone  

All you have is your fire  
And the place you need to reach  
Don't you ever tame your demons  
But always keep them on a leash  

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**Schild: Stop the Payload**

**Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:15 p.m. - By the gate of Eichenwalde Castle**

The Crusader smashes the reformed Black Knight into the Castle Gate, causing the whole building to groan and shudder and shake off a layer of dust as the two knights crash against the wood, splintering and chipping some of it off. In a fraction of a second, Reinhardt swings his hammer against Ehrhardt, striking him further into the wood and -

*It infuriates Reinhardt* what they have done to Balderich’s son.

The younger von Adler keeps shifting between spitting, writhing anger - furious and red hot red hot white hot - screaming and shrieking in agony and grief, such grief, and sobbing, begging Reinhardt to kill him, to end him - *look what they did to me, Rein, it hurts it hurts everything hurts it hurts, help me, Reinhardt, kill me, Reinhardt* -

*But try - try as he might -

*Reinhardt cannot seem to kill him.*

His hammer strikes have been surprisingly well-placed, hit at joints, knocking off bits of jet-black plating, even as he took rifle fire across his own weakened armor, feeling floods of relief as the
medical sniper would provide counter-healing, but it wasn’t enough, it hadn’t been enough -

Ehhrhardt’s armor seemed to regenerate itself.

Even his hammer, which had dissolved into smoke at one point, had just reappeared out of thin air.

When Ehhrhardt had evaporated and reformed behind him, Reinhardt had been truly terrified -

Not for himself.

Reinhardt has been prepared to die ever since the first battle of Eichenwalde.

No, Reinhardt had been truly terrified for Ehhrhardt -

Because the small boy, weeping at his father’s ceremony, already a meter and a third tall at seven years old -

The small boy was dead.

Even the brave, strong-hearted young man, bold and courageous, ready to do right by the world, ready to follow his father’s legacy -

Ehhrhardt was dead.

And Reinhardt cannot kill his ghost, grieving and hating and weeping and raging and hurting -

Reinhardt cannot bury his ghost into peaceful, endless, timeless slumber -

Even though the ghost of Ehhrhardt begs for it.

As Reinhardt steps away from the wood, the broken parts of the Black Knight’s armor crack and break and dissolve, only to reform a second later, and his shattered body rises at awkward, disjointed angles and despite the July heat -

Reinhardt feels a shiver ripple up his spine.

Even as Reinhardt swings again, the Black Knight rises, blocking the blow with his own partially-formed hammer, and there’s that high-pitched whistling scream again -

Only this time, Reinhardt steps out of the way as the Black Knight flies past him -

There’s incoherent shouting as several of the UED members rush out of his way as the Black Knight crashes into the battering ram, and Reinhardt -

He is back on the correct side -

By his fellow defenders.

They move around him as his lion shield bursts into life again - the medical sniper is back by his side immediately, seconded by Brigitte who blasts off her shotgun, followed by Hanzo who is firing arrow after arrow at the UED members - some of them drop dead, but others are merely wounded, but the archer seems to care not, taking shot after shot after -

The archer stops.

Reinhardt keeps his head and arm steady as the Black Knight struggles to stand again, and the
remaining UED members shout and yell and try to rally themselves.

“...I have one arrow left,” Hanzo states to the group and there’s an immediate sinking feeling among all of them - Reinhardt moves forward slowly until he’s back besides the Bastion, sitting in turret mode, and Satya who is shooting smaller, weaker photon barriers to the south.

“...We need to surrender,” Brigitte says, but there’s a pressure to her usually strong, cheerful voice and Reinhardt thinks his heart might break under the weight and -

“...Zhey won’t let us live.”

The whole group stops and looks up at Reinhardt, who continues to watch Ehrhardt’s ghost as he turns and squares up towards them, as his own sleek, rippling obsidian shield appears, even as it’s being cracked into by the Bastion’s Gatling gun.

The battering ram is over halfway across the bridge, nearing their eastern landing in front of the Castle Gate.

Reinhardt sees brightly colored shadows dance and jeer in his mind.

He wants to lie down on the soft grass beside Ana’s grave.

He wonders if Torbjörn will be furious with him for finally, finally dying.

He wonders if Torbjörn will be furious with him for leaving the last member of their family alone...and alive.

“...Zhey won’t let us live,” Reinhardt says again. There is not a single shred of happiness to his voice - he knows he picked the right fight, he knows he waged the right war, he knows he has fought in the right battle -

But risking them all?

Risking the last living Bastion?

Risking Brigitte?

...Torbjörn would call him a fool.

...Torbjörn will be furious...and heartbroken.

...Fareeha will be devastated -

(And in his mind -)

(He hears the last exchange he had with him -)

“We have seen something we should not,” Reinhardt says to the group, “Zhey will kill us for it.”

(“Get back to ze unit. I will hold zhem off.”)

(There is no glory more fitting for a Crusader -)

(Than to die with honor.)

“You all must go. Head into ze castle and look for ze farthest room,” Reinhardt explains, his
breathing labored, “There is another passageway out of here. I will go and fight them - it will buy you time -”

“I will not leave you,” Brigitte replies immediately - her words are small but sharp and fierce - and to his left -  
(And in his mind, the echoes of Balderich’s words linger like smoke, “You...took an oath to be a Crusader -)

The medical sniper places a small hand on his back.

(“Now...keep it.”)

For a moment -

Reinhardt closes his eyes.

(“Reinhardt...live with honor.”)

“...I can kill them,” the voice says, stoic and distant and unyielding, like a mountain unbroken

Or perhaps

A different sort of castle, ancient and proud.

Now, Reinhardt turns -

The entire group - including the Bastion, which tilts its turret head slightly - turns to Hanzo.

The ex-assassin’s face is set in grim, grey shades, but -

His eyes spark blue very briefly.

The archer looks at Reinhardt, asking calmly, “Can you stun them?”

Reinhardt looks back across the bridge, assessing the distance. From here, he could stun maybe half of them with a well-placed Earthshatter but with the Black Knight’s abilities -

The timing would have to be perfect.

“...Ze bridge may give out,” Reinhardt states almost serenely, “But I am more concerned about Ehrhardt somehow escaping Earthshatter’s range -”

“THAT'S EHRhardt?” Brigitte gasps, looking at the Black Knight. The UED group is still moving forward, and somewhere to the south of their position, several small white turrets pop and explode.

Reinhardt is about to tell them to leave again when -

There’s a small pat on his back.

He glances to his left, where the medical sniper holds up a small dart full of a bright, sky-blue liquid.

Reinhardt’s eyes go wide at the sight of it.

The medical sniper stares at him, their screen-glass face waiting expectantly and -

Reinhardt nods, saying, “Understood.”
The medical sniper clicks the dart into a small shooter on their left forearm.

“Get ready, Hanzo,” Reinhardt says, shifting slightly more towards the center. The archer nods, as Reinhardt murmurs, “Bastion, Satya, Brigitte, please cover ze south side.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Brigitte states as the Bastion tilts its turret gun towards the space between the southern cobbles and -

The battering ram is close now, only about six or seven meters away.

The ghost of Ehrhardt stands before it, black mirror shield out and ready, UED members lined up behind him.

Reinhardt feels a small hand pat against his back -

And then there’s a small sting in his left side.

And suddenly -

*Power surges through him.*

The nanobooster bots, adrenaline, and steroids rush into his bloodstream, and he feels everything rip and ripple with *energy* and *fury* and he *screams* as both power and pain overwhelm his senses -

Reinhardt feels *unstoppable*.

He rages forward, swinging his hammer as the UED members begin firing upon him, and the Black Knight drops his shield to throw up his hammer to block the incoming firestrikes and -

He clicks the button and feels the rockets in his hammer roar into surging, furious life and -

The ghost of Ehrhardt seems briefly confused but -

“HAMMER DOWN,” Reinhardt shouts to Hanzo as he slams the rocket powered hammer into the ground - the whole bridge rattles and shakes and some of it collapses into the flowing stream below and the UED members scream as the *wave of rocket heat* blasts them over -

Even the Black Knight stumbles back and falls and -

There’s an earth-shattering stillness to the air.

For a moment Reinhardt thinks nothing will happen and then -

“竜が我が敵を喰らう!” (tn: you know what the fuck this is)

The world is bathed in blue light.

---------

*When I was a man I thought it ended*

*When I knew love's perfect ache*

*But my peace has always depended*
On all the ashes in my wake

---------

**Survivor: Move the Payload**

Sunday, July 5, 2076; 12:16 p.m. - In the bailey building to the southwest of Eichenwalde Gate

He’s stuffing the shotgun full of nuts and bolts, ready to go out and crank their burning power into the defenders’ group when Jamison suddenly and abruptly puts out his normal left hand across Mako’s stomach.

The survivalist glares down at the slightly-shorter figure, snapping, “I’m ready to fuckin’ lay into them, what the hell are you -”

But the words die in his throat.

Jamison’s eyes are wide and glazed over slightly, and there’s a strange...shimmering patina to the singed parts of his skin and for a fraction of a second -

Mako thinks he can see scales.

“...You don’t wanna go out there, mate,” Jamison says, in an oddly disaffected tone, devoid of all emotions, spoken with a sharp, crystal clarity - his eyes are large and unblinking, his face slack and unfocused, but his voice rings out clear and true and almost windlike.

And then, as if his head is pinned to a swivel, he turns his neck towards Mako and flashes a terrifying, disquieting smile:

“...Unless ya wanna be eaten alive.”

A blast of blue light bursts out from around the cobble wall they’re standing behind.

---------

All you have is your fire

And the place you need to reach

Don’t you ever tame your demons

But always keep them on a leash

---------

相続人 (Sozokujin): Play of the Game

Sunday, July 5, 2076; 12:16 p.m. - On the eastern side of the Eichenwalde Castle bridge
Hanzo watches, he watches, he watches -

Reinhardt swoops in close, feigning a quick attack against the monster and the UED members, causing the Black Knight to drop his shield to block what he assumed was an incoming strike but -

“HAMMER DOWN!”

A classic line, like something from the pages of history, echoes across the courtyard and out into the soft skies, as a thunderous tremor and a roll of heat sweep across the bridge and even into the landing. The miniature earthquake - rumored to have actually, literally shattered earth in La Batalla de Setena y Dos - causes the UED members to fall and bend under the pressure and rocket wave, and even the monster itself stumbles and slumps back against the battering ram.

Hanzo shuts his eyes -

Inside him, there is only one dragon.

He notches the arrow.

Inside him, the twins of the south winds - sky and blue, blue and sky - swirl in and in and in on themselves, storming and raging, building and entwining around each other and his heart, up through his shoulder joint, along his arm, out to his wrist, where he grips the stormbow - the fusion core hidden in the weapon surges into his hand, colliding with the single dragon, winding and roaring and snarling up his arm -

In the blue storm of his soul, he tightens his focus.

*Oozora no Ryu* hungers.

The glow rises briefly up his arm, across the flesh of his neck, and into his eyes with flash of blue steel storm lightning and he shouts across hallowed battleground and holy atmosphere and the storm inside him and out -

“The dragon consumes my enemies!”

He looses the arrow.

*Oozora no Ryu* flies from him.

There is a single, time-dilating moment where the entire world stills, where the air grows dense and heavy, weighted with the surge of the storm and existence itself and then -

The world is bathed in blue light as *Oozora no Ryu* screams into existence.

“Vad i helvette??” Brigitte shrieks behind him and he hears the Bastion bweep in excited confusion and Satya gives a small gasp and even the medical sniper besides him jumps back in shock.

*Oozora no Ryu* surges forward, its twin heads swirling around each other as the dragon screams and screams and screams, it screams its sheer, thunderous delight at its own existence, at reaving and reaping and raging across the hallowed battleground, at ripping the holy atmosphere asunder, at becoming the storm inside and out. The dragon passes across Reinhardt harmlessly - it will not hurt those that its soul-bonded master trusts - and tears across the bridge, clawing and razing and reaving and reaping and raging the enemies in its path.
Hanzo feels the soul of the Black Knight flare into sunbursted life, surge against the power of the dragon’s existence for a fraction of a second, and then -

_Hanzo hears screaming screaming screaming in his head and -

A calm moment in the eye of the storm -

A softly whispered, “Thank you” -

It flickers out and dies as Aozora no Ryuu consumes it.

Hanzo feels the other souls of the UED members flicker and flare and fade - not as intensely as the Black Knight’s soul, but they struggle and shriek against the dragon for mere seconds before they too collapse into nothingness.

Aozora no Ryuu screams across the bridge into the western defensive wall and out across the forest before the twin heads split and flicker and fade and -

In a flash, Hanzo feels Ao and Sora return, winding around his heart, content and full and -

_The Death God is no more, _Ao states as _Sora hums quietly, He was quite grateful to be put out of that terrible state of existence._

_We still do not know why he was even created in the first place, _Hanzo reminds them when -

“WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT.”

Someone is grabbing Hanzo by the chestplate and shaking him furiously and Hanzo is literally rattled out of the disquiet quiet of his own thoughts and he’s shouting, “Let me go!”

He pulls himself away and twists around to see Brigitte looking horrified, the Bastion upright and standing beside her, bweeping away in an odd electronic chatter. Even the medical sniper is staring at him behind that dark screenglass mask, Hanzo just knows it, but of all of them, Satya -

Satya is the one least interested in him.

“...That was...Aozora no Ryuu,” Hanzo says hesitantly as he hears Reinhardt clank and creak behind him as the Crusader approaches. Hanzo stares at Brigitte’s wildly confused face and states with pure deadpan, “My dragon spirit.”

“...Your dragon spirit,” she states back, just as deadpan, “You just. You just have a giant dragon spirit lying around.”

“...Yes actually.” Hanzo says, smirking slightly, “I do. Technically, when they are not in that form, Aozora no Ryuu splits into two dragons to save on energy.”

Brigitte looks at him like he’s lost his damn mind but behind him, Reinhardt says, “I have heard zhat it is a specialty of ze Shimada clan, correct?”

“Indeed, some of us are born with the ability to bond to the dragons,” Hanzo adds and Brigitte just stammers, “Dragons… these dragons are real?”

“Of course dragons are real.”

Now the entire group turns to gawk at Satya, who sighs, “May I go measure Balderich’s armor now?”
“You - you are not confused??” Hanzo asks her in shock and the Vishkar architech shrugs a little, muttering, “The Naga are as old as the other Eastern dragons.”

“...Oh,” Hanzo states and inside him Ao snorts while Sora huffs, You were all worked up for nothing. Hanzo is about to say they need to get the fuck out of here when -

The two junkers suddenly appear from behind the southern limestone ruins and -

“Ms. Vaswani!” Hanzo shouts, darting towards her and she turns to look at them but -

The big one in the pig mask just holds up his hands in an open palmed gesture.

“Alright, I dunno what the fuck just happened, but I ain’t fuckin’ around with a Shimada out here,” he grumbles at them, and then points to the UED members lying on the ground behind them, “Plus our fucking paycheck is dead so I don’t even want to try anymore -”

“Aww, Hoggie, that’s no fun,” the lean, lithe one whines and the big one lolls his head, growling, “I don’t give a fuck, I did this to humor you and look where it landed us, stranded in the middle of the fucking Black Forest without cash and - WHOA HEY, HOLD ON -”

Rifle slung over their shoulder, the medical sniper stomps straight over to them, pointing their tiny glowing tranq gun directly at the big one’s chest and both junkers back away in slight fear. The sniper holds out their empty left hand and makes a gesture. The two junkers glance at each other before -

The two junkers sigh, and start rifling through their pockets and bags.

Hanzo thinks something in his brain snaps.

The lean one is pulling out a thick wad of American hundred-dollar bills, some sort of old book written in Latin, a diamond necklace, muttering to himself, “...dunno where Oi put it.” The big one, meanwhile, pulls out a massive silver crown -

“Wait,” Satya says loudly, “Isn’t that the Puteri Indonesian crown? Hasn’t that been missing for six months?”

“Uh,” the big junker drawls, before stuffing the crown back in a bag, “Nope, nah, that’s definitely not what that was. Hang on -”

He pulls a small, golden amulet out of a side pocket, dropping it in the sniper’s waiting hand and -

The sniper jerks the tranq gun to the thin one, who scowls but places a -

A holodeck?

Into their hand alongside the amulet.

The sniper huffs to themselves, pocketing both items into a small sidebag, before snapping the tranq gun to its holster and -

The sniper smacks the lean one lightly on the cheek, in a surprisingly motherly fashion, as they pat the big one on the arm -

Hanzo thinks his jaw drops as Brigitte mutters, “I don’t know what the hell is going on anymore.”

“...I don’t like you,” the big one states to the sniper, “But I do fucking respect you.” The sniper just
shrugs before turning away and -

Something clatters into the ground behind all of them and Hanzo’s whipping around as -

“...Looks like I missed one hell of a show.”

And because the day literally cannot get any weirder -

There’s suddenly a cobalt-blue Helix Raptora Mark VI flier standing on top of the battering ram behind them.

Reinhardt lets out a bellowing shout and Brigitte screams and runs past Hanzo as the woman tilts up her golden visor and holy shit -

Fareeha Amari.

She grins at the two people rushing towards her before her face suddenly changes into an expression of abject fear and she’s shouting, “WAIT, REINHARDT, NO -”

But the Crusader grabs her into a crushing hug and spins her around and even Brigitte clings onto his arm and the three of them are twirling around as Fareeha screams, “NO, STOP I JUST FLEW HERE, PLEASE LET ME REST - REINHARDT -”

Hanzo stands there feeling completely empty inside.

Beside him, the Bastion bweeps in confusion and Hanzo mutters, “Exactly. That is exactly how I feel.”

On his left, Satya approaches him, asking, “Do you know what’s happening?”

“No.”

“Oh...okay, good, I thought I was the only one,” Satya states calmly as they watch the three spiraling individuals swirl to a stop and Reinhardt gingerly sets the semi-crushed Helix flier on her feet. On the other side of Satya, the medical sniper slinks in closely and cautiously, their screenglass mask never leaving the small trio on the bridge.

“What are you doing here, Fareeha?” Reinhardt asks excitedly as the daughter of the legendary Ana Amari hugs Brigitte more calmly. Fareeha beams up at him brightly, saying, “Well, I’ve been looking for you two in Stuttgart all of yesterday and this morning, but no one had seen you, so I figured you were still out here at Eichenwalde - which, isn’t that kind of a lot of time? Did you guys camp in the forest?”

“We got lost,” Brigitte says dryly and Reinhardt huffs, “We did NOT get lost - ze forest was trying to bring us here, to zees moment!”

“...Right, okay, so uh, about that -” Fareeha starts while glancing around and she jumps where her eyes land on the Bastion, asking loudly, “Is that a BASTION.”

“Don’t ask,” the four speaking human defenders say unhelpfully.

Fareeha glances between the four of them, saying slowly, “Oooookay, um, so - are you a goddamn archer?”

“Can we just,” Hanzo sighs, “Can we just move to the part where one of them explains the battle to you?”
“...Nice tattoo,” Fareeha compliments him and Reinhardt says slowly, “Fareeha...zees es Satya Vaswani and Hanzo Shimada.”

Hanzo raises an eyebrow at the way Reinhardt emphasizes his surname, and Fareeha turns to him with wide, shocked eyes before saying stiffly, “...I see.”

“Listen, I do not work for my clan anymore,” Hanzo mutters, “So whatever you heard from McCree, you should just forget - well, whatever, the information is not relevant anymore.”

“McCree - OH. Reinhardt -” Fareeha exclaims breathlessly, “Reinhardt, Brigitte -”

“So...about Balderich’s armor,” Satya starts to say but her words are cut off by:

“Jack is alive.”

Satya and Hanzo both freeze, as does the medical sniper -

As does the entire group.

Including the junkers behind them and the Bastion unit which seems to lock up just to be part of the moment and -

“Oh,” Satya whispers and Hanzo shouts at the trio on the bridge, “YOU DID NOT KNOW??”

“I SAID WE WERE LOST,” Brigitte shouts back and Hanzo throws his arms in shock saying, “THIS HAPPENED TWO DAYS AGO.”

“WE WERE VERY LOST -”

“Oi’l say,” the lean junker mutters dryly as he comes to stand beside Satya. The big pigmasked one takes a spot on the lean one’s left and snorts, “Fucking hell, even we heard that news.”

“...Are you serious.”

The whole group falls into a deathly silence as Reinhardt’s words - not loud, but soft, so soft, like soft silk skies that break across them like the shattering of a shield - roll over them and they all turn to the Crusader who is looking at Fareeha with such burning intensity in his one good eye -

Fareeha is pulling out a datapad, flicking through things as she says just as quietly:

“The news broke in the UK in the afternoon two days ago. Someone leaked a bunch of documents about the explosion in Geneva to Atlas News, and they went live with it. There are a series of documents showing that the United Nations never declared Jack dead internally, and they never found his body. Angela has a whole crazy story you have to hear, Rein, it’s - this is way deeper than we all thought but Jesse - Jesse thinks he met him -”

The medical sniper suddenly darts out across the bridge and rushes up to Fareeha’s side, who jumps slightly at their sudden appearance and -

“Oh, uh, hello! Uh...did you help Rein and Brigitte today? That’s a biotic rifle, right? Were you one of my mother’s students?” Fareeha asks cheerfully.

The medical sniper freezes in their tracks and then nods vigorously - almost desperately.

Hanzo’s eyes narrow at that.
Fareeha suddenly grins at the sniper, saying brightly, “Thanks for covering their backs! They can be a real handful, huh?”

The medical sniper seems to wilt.

“...Zhey don’t talk much,” Reinhardt says to Fareeha in lieu of the sniper speaking, but he turns to the small sniper and also smiles broadly, “Zthank you, my friend! You were a tremendous help today!”

The medical sniper buries their screenglass face in their hands.

“Oh, oh no, did I say something wrong?” Reinhardt asks in confusion as he moves to put a big hand on the sniper’s shaking shoulder. The sniper shakes their head furiously but their whole body continues to tremble and -

“Ain’t that real noice,” the lean junker says behind them wistfully, “...Kinda feeling a little felt out.”

“...We were on the opposite team,” the big junker says in a hollow tone and Hanzo snorts in shared sentiment with his words. The lean junker says with unnerving amount of pep, “Yeah, but sometimeis, Oi could really use a victory hug, Hoggie.”

“...We lost today, Jamison.”

“It felt like a moral victory,” Jamison says and the one called Hoggie (??) sighs loudly, muttering, “I don’t get paid enough for this.”

“Technically we’re not getting paid anything at all today!”

“So JACK,” Hanzo says really loudly, and everyone looks at him awkwardly. Inside him, Ao and Sora snort-giggle and Hanzo coughs slightly, muttering, “So uh...McCree met Morrison? Are you sure?”

“Jesse seemed pretty certain,” Fareeha says sternly, glancing between Hanzo and Reinhardt and Brigitte, “He said he ran into him at Deadlock the other day -”

*Why the fuck did you go straight to Deadlock, Jesse?* Hanzo thinks to himself with minor irritation, *I did not tell you all that information just for you to put yourself in more trouble, damn fool -* 

*I felt his heart skip a beat,* Ao chuckles and Sora laughs as Hanzo shoves at them mentally.

“ - Jesse thinks that the vigilante called Soldier: 76 is Jack and -”

“Soldier: 76?” Hanzo asks as Hoggie (??) growls out, “There’s a pretty big bounty on that piggie’s head.”

“Gotta be a helluva lot bigger if he’s actually Morrison,” Jamison mutters and Hanzo adds slowly, “...A huge assassination reward just went up for him yesterday.”

The Bridge Quartet looks at him in utter horror, including the medical sniper who doesn’t even have a real face as far as Hanzo can tell. Satya sighs impatiently besides him as Hanzo shrugs, murmuring, “Just...figured it was relevant information.”

“Who would want to kill Jack??” Brigitte asks in shock and Hanzo stares at her incredulously, saying, “Are you serious?”

“Gee, maybe that group that start with a T and end in -alon,” Hoggie (??) mutters and Jamison adds,
“Or the blokes that troi’d to kill him five years ago? Just putting that one out there.”

“...Was that that Talon?” Hanzo asks them, and Jamison shrugs, making a pointed face as he says, “Prevailing theoiry says it woz Talon but they still haven’t confirmed or denied anything.”

“I cannot believe -” Fareeha starts, but she stops because -

There is a loud, booming laughter filling the air with pure joy.

Everyone stops and stares at Reinhardt, who is practically collapsing against the battering ram, wheezing and coughing and sputtering with laughter as he slams a massive fist against the wood, sending up little chips and splinters into the air and -

“Reinhardt I know this is a lot to take in -” Brigitte starts but Reinhardt shouts, “He’s alive! I cannot believe - but of course he would be alive! But where has he been? What has he been doing??”

Suddenly Reinhardt states with a sharp, chilled ice to his voice:

“...Why did he leave us?”

Fareeha and Brigitte share a worried glance.

“...Torbjörn es going to be furious with him,” Reinhardt mutters, as he stares out to the north, across the deep green trees and the white clouds and the soft skies. His eyebrows dive and furrow, even as tears continue to drip out of the corners of his eyes, and he whispers with such grief:

“I am furious with him.”

Fareeha steps closer to him and places a comforting hand on his back, muttering, “...We are all confused too, Rein.”

“Have you spoken to Torbjörn yet?” Reinhardt asks her, still staring off into the depths of the forest and Fareeha nods, saying gently, “He’s...he’s very upset.”

“Of course he es. He es going to yell at Jack when we see him again.”

Fareeha and Brigitte exchange another shared expression of concern and Brigitte asks, “...You really think we’ll see him again?”

At this, Reinhardt looks at them in open, wide shock, saying loudly:

“What? But of course we will see him again! Jack es our brother! Our friend! He will return when he es ready.”

Brigitte almost whispers as she says, “...It’s been six years, Rein.”

Reinhardt stares at them in confusion but then -

He grins broadly, his whole face lighting up with sheer unbridled joy:

“Six, ten, twenty - it may take him ze rest of his life to return, but he will come back. And Torb and I will be furious with him, but we will be happy too - because we love him.”

Hanzo thinks his jaw drops again. Beside him, Satya lets out a small gasping hum. On the other side of him, the Bastion bweeps happily. Jamison sniffles, muttering, “Brings a tear ta me eye.”
“...Alright, I hate to be the asshole that breaks up the moment,” Hoggie (?) states gruffly, “But I’m getting the fuck out of here. Their bosses -” He points a large finger to the dead UED members lying around, “- Will be here any moment when they figure out something went wrong.”

“Balderich’s armor!” Satya says suddenly, glancing at Hanzo. Hanzo nods to her, saying, “Go ahead. I will be right there. Actually -” Hanzo turns to the two junkers, asking cautiously, “Why DID the UED want Balderich’s armor? Surely it is not as good as something they can make today.”

“Ehrhardt."

Everyone - even Satya who is halfway through the northern door of the Castle - stops as Reinhardt stands again. He’s staring at the semi-smoking body of the Black Knight by the battering ram, his eyes distant and unfocused as he whispers mournfully, “Ehrhardt admired his father more than anyone else. He wanted to be just like Balderich.”

Brigitte gives a soft cry, “So it really is him?”

“That’s Ehrhardt von Adler??” Fareeha asks, staring at the Black Knight, “What happened to him?”

“The last we heard from him, the UED was giving him some sort of promotion,” Brigitte mutters, thinking it over, “But...what did they do to him?”

Hanzo is silent.

...You should probably tell them, Sora whispers as Ao murmurs, You are trying to be better.

What will adding to their grief do? Hanzo asks them back as he looks at the people on the bridge thoughtfully, What could I possibly say that would make the knowledge easier for them?

It is about being honest, Hanzo, Ao whispers as Sora murmurs, It is about respect.

Respect? Respect?? That we have killed a young man who was made corrupt by the most horrific technology of humanity?? Respect that we have killed him in the same place of his father’s own noble death?? What good does honesty do in the face of such a death??

Nothing.

The dragons neither whisper nor murmur at that.

We have helped remove him from his painful, monstrous existence, Hanzo tells them, shutting his eyes, allowing the cool darkness to bleed across his mind, We have eased his burden. What good will it do to add to theirs?

Hanzo snaps his eyes open and turns towards the Castle to follow Satya inside.

But he pulls out his datapad from his pocket and opens the messenger:

[Shimada.Hanzo]: So you just

[Shimada.Hanzo]: WALKED into Deadlock Gorge?

[...]

[Jesse.McCree]: Well shucks
[Jesse.McCree]: mornin’ to you too, darlin

[Shimada.Hanzo]: It is afternoon where I am.

[Jesse.McCree]: Im not a psychic, love

[Shimada.Hanzo]: Neither am I

[Shimada.Hanzo]: but I did hear that you ran into a certain soldier

[…]

[Jesse.McCree]: que chingados

[Jesse.McCree]: how in the fuck

[Jesse.McCree]: information travels faster than a peregrine with a chronal accelerator in a spaceship goin the speed o light

[Shimada.Hanzo]: …

[Shimada.Hanzo]: I am going to take you at your word and trust that is something fast

[Jesse.McCree]: time is not my strong suit

[Shimada.Hanzo]: …

[Jesse.McCree]: ...WAIT

[[Shimada.Hanzo] has taken a screenshot.]

[Jesse.McCree]: MOTHERFUCKIN

[Shimada.Hanzo]: Thank you for the new wallpaper, Jesse

[Jesse.McCree]: Im going back to sleep

[Shimada.Hanzo]: Wait

[Shimada.Hanzo]: …you really think Soldier: 76 is Jack Morrison?

[…]

[Jesse.McCree]: the more I think about it

[Jesse.McCree]: the more certain I am

[Shimada.Hanzo]: ...why did he not return to Overwatch?

[Jesse.McCree]: ...I dunno

[Shimada.Hanzo]: Apologies

[Shimada.Hanzo]: that was an insensitive question of me to ask

[Jesse.McCree]: nah darlin, its alright
[Jesse.McCree]: been wonderin that myself

[Jesse.McCree]: havent been sleepin well thinkin about it

[Jesse.McCree]: …

[Jesse.McCree]: he’s gotta be real fucked up

[Jesse.McCree]: you dont come out of that kinda shit without some heavy scars

[Shimada.Hanzo]: …

[Jesse.McCree]: I should not have left

[Shimada.Hanzo]: you did what you had to do

[Jesse.McCree]: no

[Jesse.McCree]: I should have stayed

[Shimada.Hanzo]: I am sorry for waking you

[Shimada.Hanzo]: you should try to sleep more

[Jesse.McCree]: nah

[Jesse.McCree]: I was already awake

[Shimada.Hanzo]: I wish you would stop smoking early in the morning

[Jesse.McCree]: well now

[Jesse.McCree]: that was just straight uncalled for

[Shimada.Hanzo]: I will continue to nag you

[Shimada.Hanzo]: until you finally have a night where you do not smoke

[Jesse.McCree]: I wish you the best of luck in that endeavor, honey

[Jesse.McCree]: but that aint happenin

[Shimada.Hanzo]: perhaps not

[Shimada.Hanzo]: but a man can dream

[Jesse.McCree]: hahaha fuck yeah he sure can

[Jesse.McCree]: …wait

[Jesse.McCree]: where the fuck you at?

[[Shimada.Hanzo] sent a picture.]

[Jesse.McCree]: wtf

[Jesse.McCree]: is that fucking eichenwalde castle
Shimada.Hanzo: hmm
Shimada.Hanzo: Do not tell anyone
Shimada.Hanzo: I was not here today
Jesse.McCree: right
Jesse.McCree: you mean like how I wasnt at Deadlock Gorge last week
Shimada.Hanzo: exactly
Shimada.Hanzo: now if you will excuse me
Shimada.Hanzo: I have work to do
Jesse.McCree: dont do nothing too dangerous
Shimada.Hanzo: don’t worry
Shimada.Hanzo: I killed them all already
Jesse.McCree: hahahaha
Jesse.McCree: wait
Jesse.McCree: that was a joke right
[...]
Jesse.McCree: han
Jesse.McCree: han respond

---

Shabh: Objective Secured

Sunday, July 5, 2076: 12:23 p.m. - Inside the hall of Eichenwalde Castle

[Masked.Shrike]: Was this current information leak your doing?
[...]
[Sombra]: well well
[Sombra]: buenos días mi amiga
[Sombra]: I was starting to wonder when you would see the news
[Masked.Shrike]: I have been busy for the last few days on a bounty.
[Masked.Shrike]: What kind of game are you playing, child?
[Sombra]: the only one worth playing
[Masked.Shrike]: This is showing your hand far, FAR too early.

[Sombra]: oh?

[Sombra]: did you think this was everything I have in my deck?

[Masked.Shrike]: …

[Sombra]: you were the one who told me to use my ammunition wisely

[Sombra]: bien, aquí está

[Sombra]: but fret not, my friend

[Sombra]: I have FAR more ammunition to play with

[Masked.Shrike]: ...Where is Jack?

[Sombra]: hmm

[Sombra]: no sé

[Masked.Shrike]: Do not fuck around with me.

[Sombra]: verdad

[Sombra]: I really don’t know

[Sombra]: he’s been offline for several days now

[Sombra]: ...but I may have an idea of where he is

[Masked.Shrike]: Tell me.

[Sombra]: hmm

[Sombra]: creo que no

[Masked.Shrike]: WHAT

[Sombra]: the soldado is in a very precarious situation right now

[Sombra]: he’s already had to face one ghost

[Sombra]: he’s not ready to face you too

[Masked.Shrike]: …

[Masked.Shrike]: wait

[Sombra]: rest assured, ghost of Egypt

[Sombra]: I will be keeping my eye on him

[Sombra]: ;)

[Masked.Shrike]: HOW
[Sombra]: must be difficult to try and watch over all those you love
[Sombra]: with only one eye
[Masked.Shrike]: HOW DO YOU KNOW
[Sombra]: juega bien, mi amiga
[Sombra]: the soldier is my toy now
[Sombra]: when I need you to play along
[Sombra]: I'll be in touch
[Masked.Shrike]: You little ass.
[Sombra]: Hasta luego
[[Sombra] has disconnected from the chat]
---

Ana nearly throws her phone in rage.
She is still shaking.
She has not stopped shaking since Fareeha landed on the bridge.
How did she let things get so out of control.
First, the terrifying smoke monster, then the desperate, heartbreaking struggle to keep Reinhardt alive, then her daughter literally dropped out of the air, and now -

*Jack is alive.*

Her hands are still shaking.
*they shook like this when the pieces of her eye were falling out of her head on the floor, shattered into small bits of flesh and bioplastic and metal and blood, her eyelid wouldn’t close no matter how much instinct and old habits and reflexes kicked in, there was blood everywhere - on her eyelashes still clinging to her face by strands of skin, on her hands still shaking as they clutched at the shredded darkness engulfing her head, on the floor and the small bits of flesh and bioplastic and metal and blood and -*

*they shook like this only two seconds before, when her still-intact cybernetic eye sent the signals to her still-intact brain that Amélie was on the other end of the scope and that Amélie was still-intact and -*

*her hands shook like this when she last heard Jack’s voice urging her to get back to the ship and she -*

*“Disengage, Ana! That’s an or-”*

*her hands did not shake when she had switched off her comms -*
“We should take it, Rein.”

Brigitte’s word cut through Ana’s head like a knife and -

Her hands are still shaking, but Ana looks up.

They’re in the grand hall of the Castle now - the sun drifts in on soft motes of dust and light, like faded flakes of gold that fall featherlike to the regal, carpeted ground, coated in chips of stone, wood splinters and tattered shards of memories. The air in here is still, yet not stagnant: it shimmers and shivers like shields woven of liquid glass light, filled with a silk soft breeze that carries the motes of sunlight in through broken windows and patches in the wood. Even in here, the stone crumbles, the wood decays, the Bastion and Spider units rot, and -

Upon the throne -

Where he finally took his endless, timeless slumber -

Sits Balderich.

In a still, yet not stagnant way, his armor remains resplendent: even with the flowers claiming it, even with the moss clinging to it, even as it is coated in dust and sunmotes, the grey-gold armor still gleams sleek and royal beneath the weight of the years and the solidifying shield atmosphere.

The blue glow of Satya’s light mesh weavings do not desecrate the armor as Ana feared they would, but instead -

They enhance the soft, dreamlike quality of it.

The Vishkar architech moves slowly, softly, humming and singing something to herself as she lays out silken strands of soft light over different parts of Balderich’s armor. For whatever reason, all of them, even the junkers, are still there, watching her work. Even the Bastion, sitting beside one of its fallen comrades, watches her with a calm head tilted, a small yellow bird perched on its shoulder. The Junkers sit in the back, by some broken computer monitors, muttering to themselves, and Ana thinks she catches snippets of them talking about trying to scrap the Bastion. Hanzo, meanwhile, stands just a short ways off from Satya - his head barely moves, but his keen eyes follow her every motion.

Reinhardt, Fareeha, and Brigitte are waiting by the Bastion, watching Satya perform her work. There’s a soft sense of grief about them - Reinhardt has hardly said a word since they entered the Castle, and Ana remembers that he is always this quiet here.

Inside Eichenwalde Castle, in the still yet not stagnant atmosphere -

Shimmering like shields woven of light -

Is where Reinhardt’s conversations go to die.

Ana watches them all from the curving corner of the hall, trying her hardest to suppress her tremors, but she -

She is still shaking.

She watches.

Reinhardt has not replied to Brigitte statement, and the blacksmith adds quietly, “...They will only
come to try and take it again. A Vishkar agent is already copying it.”

“No one of you stopped me,” Satya hums gently and Ana hears Brigitte titter, “Well...after everything you did for us, how are we gonna say no?”

“...I agree with Brigitte,” Fareeha says and Ana feels another shake rattle her bones at the mere sound. Her daughter, her daughter continues, “Someone will come to take his armor for selfish reasons. I am amazed it has not happened yet.”

“Ze person who deserves zees armor is dead.”

Reinhardt’s words echo in the still yet not stagnant air.

Ana’s torn eyelid flutters as she tries to shut her eyes into the darkness.

“...Ehrhardt would want you to protect it,” Brigitte whispers and Fareeha murmurs, “It is not about who deserves it, Rein.”

“He is not a European Defensive Crusader.”

Everyone looks at Hanzo, who is tilting his head towards them with a still yet not stagnant expression, his dark eyes sharp even in the dusty sunmote lighting. The archer looks at Reinhardt with distant appraisal, saying quietly:

“He is the Overwatch Crusader. This is not his armor to take.”

“How dare you,” Fareeha whispers darkly and Brigitte murmurs more kindly, “How can you say that?”

“He es right.”

All eyes but Satya’s shift to Reinhardt, who is still watching the Vishkar architech mournfully. The living Crusader sighs, “Zhis place...es Balderich’s tomb. He gave his life to defend it, and it es made sacred by his presence. And now...it es Ehrhardt’s restings place too.”

Reinhardt’s voice goes still for a moment, before he says quietly:

“Ze Crusader’s oath es eternal. Zhey were called...and zhey have answered. I could never take zhat honor from zhem.”

And the room falls into stillness again -

Like dust motes made of sunlight drifting among them.

All that can be heard is Satya humming something faintly.

And then

Suddenly

There’s a soft bweep-bweep-bweeping beside Reinhardt.

The entire group looks at the Bastion in surprise as it gestures to Balderich’s armor, and then back to itself. Fareeha looks confused, Hanzo looks unamused by the whole thing, Junkrat looks bewildered, and Brigitte looks concerned, but Reinhardt -
Ana’s good eye widens in shock.

Reinhardt looks calm.

Patient.

Understanding.

“...It’s asking if Balderich is the same as it. With all the plants,” Brigitte “translates” for the group. Reinhardt continues to look at the Bastion as if it is not asking the most complicated, heartbreaking question in the world. The whole room - even Satya - seems to wait, full of still, not stagnant air and dustlight made of slivers of the sun and -

“...His sleep es permanent,” Reinhardt tells the Bastion calmly, patiently, understandingly, “He will never wake again.”

Out of some sort of sense of respect, Hanzo shuts his eyes. Fareeha holds her head high, but Ana thinks she sees her daughter swallow a sigh of grief, and her own heart pangs with guilt and fear and self-loathing -

“Bweep...bweep-bweep,” the Bastion chirps solemnly, and -

Brigitte also chokes on shock and horror, before gasping out the words:

“Like...like its friends, it says.”

Satya freezes, her whole body tensing at the statement. Hanzo’s bittersweet scowl deepens. Fareeha buries her head in a hand. Even Junkrat seems still at the comment, and Roadhog - despite his brusque attitude - remains quietly impassive.

And then

There’s a soft clattering of metal on metal

As Reinhardt pats the Bastion’s machine gun arm, replying gently, “...Yes. Like your friends. We are ze last of our kinds, my friend.”

And then Reinhardt lifts his head and -

The still, soft, dusty sunlight wreaths his aged hair in gold, like the lion’s mane it had once been -

As he smiles with such calm, patient, understanding honor:

“...But zhat does not mean we are alone.”

Ana’s hands shake at the sound of serenity in his voice - but not in fear, not in rage, not in arrogance, not in shock but in –

Her whole soul shudders in a grieving joy.

She is still shaking.

*He is in good hands.*

Her hands shake.

*They will watch over him.*
She turns, and heads up the massive hallway to the Castle entrance, wandering through dust and sunmotes.

She hears the conversation return as she climbs up the massive stairs, winding her way to the southern doorway by the Castle Gate. Her screenglass mask automatically filters the bright sunlight for her when she steps outside, listening to the whispering of the trees and the soft sky sounds of the birds -

The warmth of the sun makes her want to lay down in the grass and listen to sweet, song laughter -

“Shrike.”

Ana twists around, facing Hanzo, who watches her with a still yet not stagnant expression. They assess each other before he asks, “That’s your codename, right? The Masked Shrike?”

After a beat, Ana nods.

“From my understanding, your territory is mainly in the Middle East? You are a long ways from your turf,” Hanzo states. Ana makes a noncommittal shrug, but pulls out her datapad to the document app. She quickly types out:

“Like Reinhardt and Brigitte, I was very lost. But I have secured what I lost.”

Hanzo snorts at that when she shows him, smirking slightly. But his face falls when he asks, “I would like to make an offer for you.”

Behind her screenglass mask, Ana scowls.

She is not shaking anymore.

Her hands quickly write: “I have other commitments. These will not be jeopardized. But I will hear out your offer.”

Hanzo reads the words, then flicks his calm gaze to her screenglass face. Finally he sighs, “It is not something that will really require you to actively pursue anyone. I am looking for information.”

“...Information? What kind?” Ana writes.

Hanzo’s gaze is sharp and fierce and focused, one sniper to another, before he takes his shot:

“Have you heard of the mercenary called the Reaper?”

Ana’s hands tense, but do not shake, but she -

She wanders through bullet-pierced stainless steel walls in the old Watchpoint, now run by Helix Securities - or rather, ran by Helix Securities. Dead bodies cover the floor, covered in shotgun pellets and rifle shells and blood, such blood. No supplies are missing, but the main computer is destroyed, the server room is trashed, there are long claw marks on everything, the smell of ash and smoke and burning human flesh hangs still and stagnant in the air and -

She has heard of him before, whispered in the dying breaths of a Helix official she desperately tries to save, stabbing him with blank nanobots and biotic fluid but it isn’t enough - the man coughs up far too much blood and collapses and she -

Her hands shake -
Ana nods, before writing, “...Our territories overlap. From my understanding, he is not interested in bounties. We have never interfered with each other’s work.”

Hanzo scowls at that, but mutters, “I have heard he is seeking information on Overwatch and the United Nations. Do you know anything about this?”

“On the rare occasions where I enter old Watchpoints after him,” she writes, “The computer infrastructure will be physically ruined.”

“I see -” Hanzo begins but Ana continues writing:

“Almost everyone occupying the Watchpoints will be dead or dying.”

Hanzo outright glares at that, muttering, “What? He just...kills everyone?”

Ana shrugs, but Hanzo looks preoccupied with his thoughts as he mutters, “That does not seem to suit him…”

“Is there a bounty on him?” Ana writes and Hanzo sighs, “There was a bounty on him...until about a week ago when it was pulled from the black market.”

Now Ana frowns, typing out, “Someone wanted him dead...and then they just didn’t? Are you sure he’s still alive?”

Hanzo makes a deadpan expression muttering, “Yeah, I am very certain he is still alive.” And then he gestures to the bridge, where the bodies lie in a still and stagnant sunlight, saying:

“He is like the Black Knight over there.”

Ana freezes. Hanzo senses her tension and mutters, “There are things that can kill them. Shimada Dragons can. Legend says that they can kill each other too -”

“What are they?”

Hanzo stops at the words on the screen, before his expression falls and he looks physically pained. When he opens his eyes again, there’s a still yet not stagnant bittersweet sadness on his face:

“The rumors say they are people who have died yet did not properly pass on. That is how the legends in the East speak of them. They are ghosts, wraiths, monsters - spirits damned to wander the earth in search of the battlefield -”

“I am not interested in myths, child. What ARE they. How do they exist?” Ana writes out furiously, causing Hanzo to snap with a touch of impatience, “I am telling you what I know -”

“I know your damn dragons are part fusion technology.”

Hanzo freezes now.

Ana rapidly taps out another message:

“I know that Overwatch never found the Ryuujin God Program, yet the Fujisawa Omnium surrendered anyways. Just as Reinhardt said, I too do not believe in coincidences.”

Hanzo stares at her coldly, critically.

Ana quickly erases the message and writes out, “Don’t fuck around with me, child. I have been
given the runaround by those junkers and someone I naively assumed was an ally today. I do not have the time or patience for your half-stories. What is the truth about these monsters?"

Hanzo glares at her intently before stating, “Do we have a deal?”

“What is the exact nature of your offer?”

“I want any information you find on him. His territory overlaps with yours. You are the only consistent black market bounty hunter of any renown in the Mediterranean area. The odds of you encountering him or finding his trail is high. You do not have to actively pursue him - I merely want information on where he is and when.

“In exchange, I will ask you about any bounties I pursue in your territory and offer them to you first. If you permit me to hunt a bounty, I will give you fifty percent of my reward even if you do not assist me. I require only a moderate amount of money in order to eat and find places to sleep, but otherwise I care not for wealth.”

“If there is no bounty on his head, why would you deliberately try to pursue him?” Ana writes and Hanzo -

Hanzo smirks a vicious, wild grin.

Ana’s hands shake slightly at the sight.

“I made a terrible mistake many years ago. I cannot change the past. This I know for certain,” Hanzo states, that bittersweet, twisting grin on his face, “But I will do what I must to correct the future.”

Suddenly, Hanzo glances to the body of the Black Knight, and his face transforms back into one of twisted, harsh pain, “There is no cure for what they have. Death is the sweetest gift that can be offered. And I am the only one who can.”

Well, that’s what you think, Ana intones dryly to herself, wondering if Genji has any idea about this, but she taps out instead, “Are you certain there is no other solution? Death seems a… harsh choice.”

“If there is a cure, it has not been found for years, probably decades,” Hanzo says and Ana frowns, writing, “They have existed for so long?”

“I do not know myself. This is the honest truth. The rumors say that governments have been creating them for as long as nanobot technology has existed. But again, I do not have proof of this.”

“...Governments?”

“Take your guess - Russia, China, the United States,” Hanzo mutters before nodding to the bodies on the bridge, “The United European Defensive Front apparently.”

“What do you mean by ‘as long as nanobot technology has existed?’” Ana writes and Hanzo sighs, “I am not a medical expert, I cannot tell you the details, nor do I know them well enough. But the process involves applying a version of current healing genetic therapy technology to a recently deceased body.”

Ana freezes.

Because that sounds a lot like -
Hanzo shrugs, saying, “It very rarely works. Nobody on the black market seems to understand why one situation will result in a ghost and another will not. There are rumors of sightings and assassinations as far back as the Crisis.”

“Ziegler?”

Is the only word she writes.

Hanzo frowns before muttering, “I do not know what Doctor Ziegler knows. I am surprised no one has targeted her, actually. From my understanding, her current work for the University at Oasis does not involved nanobot technology. She has moved on to something else.”

And then Hanzo makes a dead expression, muttering mainly to himself, “I am surprised no one has offered her a deal to buy her technology either. Or perhaps they have but the offer was not high enough.”

“Angela would never sell her knowledge.”

Is all she writes. Hanzo looks up at the screenglass and they glare at each other intensely before he states slowly, “Everyone has a price… Or a breaking point. No one has found hers yet.”

“If that is a threat -” Ana starts to write but Hanzo snaps, “It is a warning. I do not know who you are, Masked Shrike, but it is plain as day that you are deeply involved in ex-Overwatch affairs. Your attachment to the Crusader is proof enough.”

Ana freezes.

“...I will not hurt Doctor Ziegler,” Hanzo finally sighs, “That would be wrong. And it would upset the few friends I have. But I am not here to protect her from any harm that may befall her. I suppose that is your job.”

Ana stares at him, not moving, not writing -

Not shaking.

The two snipers assess each other calmly until Hanzo asks coolly, “Information about Reaper in exchange for fifty percent of the bounty rewards I pursue. I will even change the terms so that it will be from any bounties I pursue while I am searching for him. Do we have a contract?”

...Damn yakuza, so businesslike, Ana huffs to herself, before holding out her hand.

Hanzo blinks in surprise, but then accepts the handshake.

Ana taps through her datapad before lifting up the screen to show contact information - everything on the datapad is registered under her codename, everything is directed to her EncryptID account, nothing -

Nothing is attached to Ana Amari.

All that exists now is her ghost.

Damn Sombra, Ana curses to herself, Damn her. How did she even find out? None of the hospital’s systems are online. Banoub would never reveal me to anyone. How could she possibly know?

Hanzo pulls out his own datapad and swipes through a few screens before he taps his datapad
against hers. The two devices blink, and then Hanzo’s information shows on Ana’s screen, and vice-versa.

Ana scowls at the information, before sliding back to the document app and writing, “You use your real name for everything?”

Hanzo smirks, “One with true power has nothing to hide.”

You pretentious little prick, Ana growls to herself, Get yourself a fucking fusion weapon and suddenly you think you can waltz around the world without fear.

But Hanzo’s expression dips slightly and he murmurs into the hallowed atmosphere, “I have nothing left to lose. All I have left is the pursuit of redemption. If someone comes to stop me...well, that is simply where the road ends.”

Ana -

She understands that.

She taps something into her datapad and hits send.

Something pings on Hanzo’s device and he jumps slightly, before checking his messages:

[Masked.Shrike]: You will tell me if you find him, yes?

---

Hanzo snorts, chuckling, “I will do what I can.” But then he scowls, saying somberly, “You saw what happened today. If you encounter him, I would urge you to run. Normal bullets or even fusion weapons will slow him down, but they cannot stop a ghost. Rumors hold that Omnic Fusion techniques might stop them, but said techniques have to be intense. I have not heard of any Omnics trying, however, and -”

“Hanzo.”

Both snipers turn as Satya walks through the doorway, followed by Brigitte and the Bastion. The Vishkar architech states to her guard, “I am going with them to their van - Brigitte has agreed to let me see some of the specifications of the rocket in the armor. Will you come with us?”

Hanzo makes a bland face, grimacing, “I am rather useless without arrows.”

“I hear you can read a map, you trailblazer,” Brigitte chuckles dryly and the Bastion bweeps seemingly just to hear itself be happy. Hanzo sighs, “I would be more endeared to join you if you did not mock me, Brigitte.”

“She is being sarcastic,” Satya says calmly and clearly as if Hanzo did not, in fact, pick up on Brigitte’s clear sass, and the architech continues, “The Bastion knows the fastest route.”

“Yeah, um, how exactly are you communicating with it?” Hanzo asks suspiciously. Both Satya and Brigitte just shrug. The Bastion shrugs a second later.

“...That was truly an inspiring answer,” Hanzo says brittly and Ana snorts in her mask. The archer sighs, “I will stay here with Mr. Wilhelm then. Perhaps I can take out that Jamison character if he gets...any ideas. Sniper,” Hanzo asks, turning towards her, “Will you accompany them?”
Damn yakuza, Ana thinks again, *Make a partnership with them, and suddenly they think they can ask you to do their dirty work.*

Ana taps out on her phone, “I will accompany them to their van and then leave.”

“So soon?” Brigitte asks, as if their little group here had actually planned for this absurd event and they were simply in Eichenwalde for a picnic. Ana writes, “I have been away from my duties for far too long. The sooner I get back, the better.”

“I see,” Brigitte say, before sticking out her hand. Ana takes it, and the smith smiles at her brightly, “Thank you. You kept us alive today. I know Rein appreciated everything you did.”

Ana withdraws her shaking hand, and writes hastily:

“Such heroes inspire me.”

Brigitte reads it, and bursts into vivid laughter, saying, “No, no, Pappa says we’re just on a fool’s mission -” but she pauses when Ana writes:

“Today, you made the right decision. Never stop fighting for what you believe in.”

Brigitte scowls deeply at the words before looking up at the screenglass mask, murmuring, “...Do I know you?”

Ana -

Her hands do not shake.

She writes:

“Not anymore.”

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[SSO File: XXX-XX-149]

العريف Candidate: 014

Name: Ehrhardt von Adler

Nationality: German

Age at Death: 36

Status: Alive [Updated 5.JULY.2076: DECEASED]

Cause of Death: [Updated 5.JULY.2076: UNKNOWN]

Affiliation: United European Defensive Front

Alias: The Black Knight
Date of Successful Nanite Application: 13.MAY.2076

Date of Approved Field Deployment: 8.JUNE.2076

Justification of Candidacy: [Approved: 1.NOVEMBER.2075] Von Adler shows all the potential that his predecessor Balderich von Adler had. With improved Crusader armor technology and Al Azif nanite technology, von Adler will likely be able to withstand direct Bastion or Spider unit turret fire. In the event that the Crusader fusion shield shatters, von Adler will have the Al Azif nanite technology to rely on. The Al Azif nanite technology will permit him to continue to engage in fighting where earlier Crusader supersoldiers would have been forced to retreat. If properly bonded to armor and hammer, von Adler will be able to materialize these items out of the Al Azif nanite technology. We believe that he will be effective in being deployed against the newly-revived and hostile Siberian Omnium, as he will be able to siege the Omnium directly.

Chapter End Notes

Typical Hanzo POTG, amirite? Never mind that Ana basically kept everyone alive or Bastion gunned everyone down, Hanzo steals the spotlight with that "clutch" giant dragon.

I barely know much Japanese (hey, liripip, I saw your ask ;_; I will get to it, I promise), but from what I can tell, when you write "Ao" and "Sora" together, they form one word - "Aozora" or "blue sky."

---

Also, Fareeha literally descending with the plot. Always trust the good Rocket Queen to bring us back up to speed.

---

Everyone holds more secrets than they're willing to share. Such a shame.

SSO is a bunch of nerds. No one - not even the bad guys - is safe from me writing them into being geeks.

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Next week, we return to a supersoldier enhancement program to witness the beginning of a crisis...

And we join a battle in the hills of gold that has lasted almost 72 hours.

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Friday update: MAN WHAT A WEEK AMIRITE

JOOOOOOODER

Okay, so like sorry I was so late on this but DOOMFIST can yall believe it?? He's
REAL. I'm so hyped, y'all don't even understand! I've written like three essays over on tumblr, this is all so exciting.

I don't think I'll have to change tooooo much of And Overwatch for All's plot - like 90% of it is planned to occur before Doomfist breaks out of prison in the timeline. I am BEYOND THRILLED that Blizzard confirmed Talon is BASICALLY A CORPORATION and the Anti-Overwatch. I legitimately freaked out on my break at work yesterday when I watched Jeff’s update and he talked about how Talon is run by a council of leaders.

I'd like to point everyone in the direction of Chapter 11 (The [SSO] Chatlog) and say THE HYPE TRAIN IS STILL GOING WHOOO BOY.
Overture: Eating Breakfast When a Paradigm Shift Occurs

Chapter Summary

In the early hours of a cold February morning, a Crisis begins. Two supersoldiers find strength in each other as the world around them begins to crumble.

Five years later, they fight to keep the city of lights alive - the commander's priorities are focused on breaking the battle, but the soldier has a different set of priorities in his heart.

Chapter Notes

I don't know why, but today was very draining.

This chapter and the next one are some of my pride and joys.

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WELCOME BACK TO SEP.

BET YOU THOUGHT YOU'D NEVER SEE THE CREW OF MISFITS AGAIN.

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Song is "Like the Dawn" by The Oh Hellos (Youtube link)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I was sleeping in the garden when I saw you first

He'd put me deep, deep under so that he could work

And like the dawn you broke the dark and my whole earth shook

I was sleeping in the garden when I saw you

At last, at last

Bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh, at last

At last...
And you will surely be the death of me

But how could I have known?

(I was sleeping in the garden when I first saw you)

(You broke the dark)

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Strike Flashback: The Battle of 72

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Soldado: Life Watered With Blood

Sunday, July 9, 2050: 1533 (03:33 p.m.) - in the foothills of the Sierra de Chiconquiaco, just east of Laguna Verde, in the municipality of Alto Lucero de Gutiérrez Barrios, located in the State of Veracruz, Mexico

Time Since Arrival: 71 hours, 23 minutes, 41 seconds

“Jack… Jack.”

Something is calling to him.

It is surprisingly warm - a contrast to the wet, sticking heat clinging to every inch of his skin. It is surprisingly gentle - a contrast to the hard woody bark pressing into awkward angles against his back.

It is surprisingly sweet - a contrast to the bitter, acrid taste of metallic blood in his mouth -

“Jack… Jack.”

Someone is calling to him.

His voice is surprisingly deep - a contrast to the shallowness of the darkness behind his eyelids, backlit by leaf-filled sunlight. His voice is surprisingly heartfelt - a contrast to the dull throbbing of Jack’s own pulse fuzzing his head.

His voice is surprisingly clear - a contrast to the humidity and haze clogging his lungs as his soul begs for the endless, timeless sleep -

“… John fucking Morrison, if you don’t wake the fuck up, I’m gonna start screaming into the comms again -”

Oh.
Gabriel is calling to him.

That wakes him right the fuck back up.

The mere act of waking out of the microsleep sends Jack spinning sideways, sliding off the rough bark of the mahogany tree and into the dense, semi-rotting undergrowth around the leafy tree’s wide base. His fall is cushioned by decaying mahogany leaves, small shoots and sprouts, and wide ferns that immediately fluff back up around him. He lies like that for a long second, blinking back the sleep fogging around his head as he attempts to pull himself back up and out of the draw -

Everything in the forest is a shade of green - broad slick leaves from wide, hardwood trees, creeping tendrils of vines large and small clinging to them, and the dripping ink moss clinging to those. The sunlight seeps in as a slow, brightly-shadowed rainfall - the misted sunfall is tinted green, verdant and rich from the haze of the forest, living and breathing and photosynthesizing as light and water condense in and out of existence. Everything in the forest has weight - sunbeams that fall upon him as dense as lacy gold, humidity that webs and weaves inside and outside his lungs, the mere color green presses into him like the thickest cloud -

The echoing gunfire and screams cut through the density like flashing obsidian knives before the weight of the living, breathing forest absorbs them again -

“For the love of all that is holy, Gabriel,” Ana’s sharp voice hisses back over the comms, directly into his right ear, “Do not start screaming.”

“I have to wake him up somehow, Ana -” Gabriel growls back as Reinhardt laughs heartily - how the fuck is he still so happy?? - from his end. Behind all the noise, Jack thinks he hears Torbjörn sigh weightedly and -

“I'M AWAKE,” Jack heaves into the shared Strike comms, cutting Gabriel off as he scrambles back upright, using the mahogany tree to steady himself. Even in his brief minute of microsleep and the subsequent stumble, his instincts and habits had refused to let go of the heavy pulse rifle, and he hauls it back into its proper position as Gabriel sighs, “Good to hear you’re still with us, sleepwalker. Been trying to get you back to the land of the living for the last minute and a half.”

...Has it really only been a minute and a half?

“Sorry,” Jack grunts as his blueglass pings the nearest pelotón rurale, roughly 300 meters away. Stretching quickly and tugging at his sweat-and-mist-laden shirt, the soldier growls, “Paused for a breather and then… well, you know what happened.”

And then he’s off.

In a shocking turn of events, it isn’t just the emotionality - the disquieting mental struggle against the massive losses and horrors, the relentless torrent of doubt and fear and death - that is undercutting the Strike Team this time, but also the sheer physicality, the density and weighted sunfall humidity of existing and fighting for existence, battling sleep and Omnics and steady dehydration. After five years of fighting, being effectively airdropped into emergency battles is the name of the game - now that the majority of the Omniums were starting to fall, the last few hold-outs were getting desperate. Across Australia and Russia, Central Cores were finally falling, yet Mokosh and the Rainbow Serpent continued to make their final stands in their Omniums. Neither of them had cracked yet, though the Rainbow Serpent inched precariously closer to being penned in.

But Quetzalcoatl?
Quetzalcoatl had gone on the *attack*.

So although the Strike Team had already been en route to Mexico State to start their assault on Quetzalcoatl’s Omnium, it had been a surprise to get the emergency broadcast.

But honestly?

Not *that big* a surprise.

Gabriel had predicted one of the remaining God Programs would lash out. He’d bet $20 on the Rainbow Serpent going on the offensive while Quetzalcoatl would jump ship to a smaller Central Core somewhere in the Sierra Occidental, but Jack had raised the stakes to a nice dinner out, betting on Quetzalcoatl launching a surprise attack on the Federal District in an effort to snuff out the newly revived Mexican government and stop the possibility of a direct launch from the Mexican armed forces on Quetzalcoatl’s base.

So it hadn’t really been *that big* a surprise to get the emergency broadcast.

No, the *big* surprise was that it came from Dorado in the Alto Lucero municipality -

On the fringes of the Laguna Verde station.

...The Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant Station.

The only real source of power for the Gulf Coast states of Veracruz and Tamalpais.

They had made an emergency landing on the coastal plain and launched straight into the streets of Dorado -

…The massacre on the edges of the town had *ruined* them.

Jack thought he had seen the worst of the Crisis already.

He thought it had been bad to see Australian and New Zealander forces brutally gunned down in the deep red sands of the Gibson Desert.

He thought it had been bad to watch Russian, Chinese, and Korean forces crushed by Titans, the weight of their deaths dyeing the snow with their lives.

He thought it had been bad to watch the West African coalition forces get torn apart and trampled by OR14s, the savannah sun so intense that it caused their bodies to cast heat waves.

He thought.

Jack had thought.

He had thought he had nothing left to *give*.

That between the Crisis and the Strike Team and SEP and Gabriel -

He had given all he had.

But seventy-one hours, twenty-four minutes ago, on the streets of Dorado -

Painted red red red red against the backdrop of the living, breathing forest -
Jack bled out the rest of his heart.

In a minute and a half he’d killed seven or eight Spider and Bastion Units by himself, emptying pulse stock after pulse stock.

...Had it only been a minute and half?

Behind shield and turret, sniper fire and shotgun pellet, pulse munition and biotic field -

Overwatch had rallied the remaining *rurales* fighters in the town -

And slowly, so slowly -

Seventy-one hours and twenty-four minutes of slowly -

Had pushed the frontline back back back, to the living, breathing forest.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-four minutes, seventeen seconds -

Almost four kilometers outside of the Laguna Verde Power Plant, the literal beating, pulsing heart of Dorado -

Deep into the weighted sunfall clouds in the heart of the dying, choking forest.

*Jack runs.*

Leaves and branches pull at him like incessant hands, whips and vines coil towards him, ferns and roots claw underfoot, moss clinging and dripping everywhere across his blue body armor, flowers caressing him through damp hair and blood-and-sweat-stained cheekbones, but still -

Jack runs.

“Location,” Gabriel’s voice snaps in his ear, as blasts of shotguns echo in the crackling background. Jack grits his teeth as he jumps over a fallen tree, covered in bright pink flowers and cracked in half from Bastion Gatling fire, petals drip-drip-dripping red like strange water, and the soldier heaves against the weight of the run and the weight of the air, “Nearing Hector’s platoon. Going in to assist and cut off this section of Spiders. Orders?”

In the haze of the forest, there’s a sparking of light, the auditory bites of the gunfire and screams dulled by the swell of the cloud he’s rushed into.

“Return to Reinhardt when you’re done. I’m dragging -” a smattering of shotgun fire, the sound of rotting wood snapping, the crackling of a turret bulletstorm - “- Joder, mierda - I’m dragging a Bastion squad to Rein.”

“How many?” Ana’s voice cuts in, critical at the angle of every word. Gabriel huffs back, “Looking like ten right now, not sure if I’ll encounter more -”

“Engaging Spiders at H Platoon,” Jack interrupts as the heavy sun-sparked mist clears slightly, and before his brain has fully registered his field of view, he’s locked the sights of the pulse rifle on a creeping, waltzing brightly-colored shadow -

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The Spider unit’s gun head explodes into a million fragments and the spindly legs collapse without coordinated guidance yet *Jack just goes* -
Seventy-one hours, twenty-four minutes, thirty-nine seconds -

He dances - his own brightly-colored shadow moves across watery sunfall mists - in between trees that grab and reach, firing off at a second Spider unit not two meters behind the first. The third, mid-crawl over a dead tree, turns its attention from the humanoid shape in front of it towards Jack instead, its gunhead whipping around and stirring tendrils of dense fog in its wake. Yet before it has even finished fully turning its gaze, its head cracks and splits as lightning-blue pulses pierce through it.

Jack runs.

He’s leaping over the third Spider unit’s body, and he sees the other three, spread out, crawling through ferns that pull undertow and fog that breathes -

His fingers flick across the buttons on the side of his blueglass -

[Spider Auto-targeting: ON]

In his right eye, four diamond reticles light up, taking on a light, airy glow - a contrast to the weight of everything around him, the weight of the undying need for sleep, the weight of his run and the weight of his breath, the weight of the light as it falls in slanted green-tinted shadows -

Seventy-one hours, twenty-five minutes, ten seconds -

Four reticles light up.

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The nearest one collapses as seven pulse shots riddle its body, and before it can even fully fall, he’s flicked the barrel to the next-closest, pumping out another seven pulses before it too cracks and chips and dies. His hands are already swapping out the empty pulse stock for another one - his fourth-to-last - slapping the new one into the munitions chamber and he’s -

He’s already on the fourth one.

It’s deep in the shadows of light and water, beyond what his actual, real vision can see - to his human eye, it’s just an odd plant, it’s just a bush bending and moving under the weight of the atmosphere, but to his tactical blueglass and his bled-out mind, it’s a Spider unit, it’s a fucking Spider unit and it too -

It too is going to die.

He’s already pulling the trigger -

It’s already dropping dead, nine pulse rounds for this one due to the fall-off range of the gun, but it’s dead, it’s already dead -

Jack lines up his shot with the last reticle, even as the last living Spider unit of this squad is looking at him.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-five minutes, fifteen seconds -

The last Spider unit drops dead, seven pulse shots in its body, its core burned out by liquid lightning plasma.

Jack runs.
He moves into Hector’s group, finally skidding to a stop by the hover carrier with dwindling supplies loaded on it. He notes the four men sitting by it on the ground, the body of a fifth member lying beside them, and glances up as a tall, weary-looking man approaches, the brightly-colored shadows looking long and drawn in his dark eyes.

“Gracias, Jack,” Hector sighs and Jack nods back, eyes barely processing, but his hands are moving. His left hand pulls a biotic field capsule - his third to last - from his right arm band, and he cracks it by the four men on the ground, muttering, “¿Cómo están sus suministros (tn: how are your supplies?)?”

Hector just gives him a dead look.

That’s all Jack needs to know.

“...Entiendo. Esperaré por nuestro portador (tn: I understand. I will wait for our carrier),” Jack informs him and Hector shakes his head, insisting, “Por favor tome algunas raciones (tn: Please, take some rations) -”

“Los necesitas más que yo (tn: you need them more than I),” Jack sighs, before righting his rifle again. He nods once again to Hector, who looks lost, before he is off again.

“Hector’s platoon is low on supplies,” Jack states into the comm as he searches for the mostly-overgrown logging trail that will get him back to Reinhardt’s position the fastest. He adds slowly, “...I used a biotic field on them.”

“...Jesus Christ,” Gabriel’s voice cuts back in, but his commander sighs, “Fucking hell, understood. Estimated time to shield?”

Jack bursts across a linear segment of mostly dead leaves with some shoots springing up, dotting the way, and already he’s rushing to the left -

“ETA: fifteen seconds. No drags. I’m running low on everything though,” Jack informs them, knowing full well that they’re all running low on everything.

“We got a carrier coming up in three minutes,” Torbjörn replies, his voice crackling to life, “Hold out.”

“Easier said than done,” Ana gasps and a second later there’s the bang of a sniper rifle that echoes in both the comms and the fog of the forest, followed by her voice chuckling, “Two with one shot, Rein.”

“Zhat’s not fair!” Reinhardt bellows back - Jack hears several loud crashes of metal on metal - and the Crusader almost whines, “You know I cannot do headshots, Ana!”

“I got seven in six seconds,” Jack snorts, as he hurtles through the forest, “Does that count for anything?”

“No, because you used that fucking aimbot in your blueglass,” Gabriel grumbles back, before snapping, “ETA: thirty seconds.”

“You can use your IFF-auto-aim too, you know?” Jack snarks, “We all have it.”

“You shouldn’t be so proud, Gabriel,” Ana says before another loud rifle shot ripples across the forest. The sniper taunts, “You need all the aiming help you can get.”
"I can aim just fine - fucking thanks, ya assholes,” Gabriel hisses and Jack feels his stomach drop slightly as several shotgun blasts ring out in the distance of the forest. His commander’s voice is slow to return, and when it does, there’s a strange wince to it, “…Lone Spider caught me off-guard.”

He’s hurt.

Suddenly, there’s a strange, shimmering blue light jutting across the forest path. It seems magnified by the heated mist in the air, and Jack skitters to a stop as Reinhardt steps out from the trees. The Crusader glances towards him, nodding a small acknowledgement as Jack steps up beside him. Not too far off, another sniper shot sings into the trees.

“I’m here, Gabriel,” Jack pants a half-second, using the brief pause to wipe the sweat from his face on his sleeve. He corrects the pulse rifle the other half-second later, hanging out just off to the right side of Reinhardt, and -

He’s hurt.

Jack says with a little more resolution, “Pulse Rifle ready. Strike Team check-in for Bastion Squad drag. Ana?”

“I have eyes on the shield,” the sniper says crisply, “Locked and loaded. Reinhardt, take a step back - that will give me a better view for the pull.”

“Understood,” Reinhardt huffs, and as if in unison, he and Jack step back a bit, leaving the overgrown trail clear for Ana’s shots.

He’s HURT.

“Affirmative, shots are good,” she confirms with them, and Jack asks, “Torbjörn?”

“Turrets ready,” the engineer grunts, “Placements on Reinhardt’s four and eight. Bastion-positive IFF-tracking is on, confirmed-allies-tracking is on.”

“I hear you,” Jack replies before asking Reinhardt, “Your rocket is good?”

“…Ze flaring es a leettle off,” the giant knight says over the comms for all of them, “But I can correct zhat. Et still has enough power for more Earthshatters.”

“We’re set, Gabriel,” Jack says to his commander.

HE’S HURT.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-six minutes, three seconds.

“Bastion drag coming in,” Gabriel’s voice comes across loud and clear but Jack can hear the softest twinge of pain -

HE’S HURT.

“T-minus five… four… three -”

At this, there’s a burst of movement across the trail as Gabriel darts through the clinging trees and brightly-colored shadows and sunfall cloud. He looks as rough as Jack feels - blood and sweat clinging to everything, his ridiculous fucking beanie slightly askew, his chestplate and leg guards have several dents in them, one red-lined hole by his right shoulder, drip-drip-drip like strange red moss, but his eyes -
His light-dark eyes, flaked with red and gold and amber and dappled, weighted green -

His eyes still *burn*.

Gabriel practically flies across the trail, past Reinhardt’s shimmering shield as five hulking shadows emerge among the treeline and -

The turrets are already firing.

At their four and eight-o-clock angles, bullets spray out from several meters up - *how the fuck did Torbjörn even get up there?* - scattering into the five-count Bastion units that appear through the mist, and a fraction of a second later, one falls as sniper fire cracks and splits its head open, the shot booming out. Jack pulls the pulse rifle to the far right one - the one currently being turret-targeted, and fires two pulse shots at the head before the combined damage undoes the Omnic trooper.

He’s already pulling the trigger on the next one.

On the opposite side of Reinhardt, Gabriel is blasting off shotgun pellets from his left gun, and one of the left Bastions drops dead, its head is just *gone* -

The second Bastion on the right falls from more pulse munitions to its face and -

“Reloading,” Jack tells the other two ground units, popping his third-to-last pulse stock into the gun. He sees Gabriel also do the same - clipping his right shotgun on the back of his belt for a second as he clicks another shot into the barrel of his left gun. Jack snaps back up just in time as the fifth Bastion of the first set is sniped down, and Gabriel rears his right hand.

“My turn,” Ana says into the comms, “Handle the next wave.”

“We got it covered,” Gabriel replies, before tapping the butt of his right shotgun lightly against Reinhardt’s back, muttering, “Knock ‘em out, Rein.”

The second set of five Bastion almost immediately appears out of the density of the forest, spread as wide as the first set. One of them sweeps in surprise at seeing the first set completely destroyed on the ground and -

“SENTRY MODE INCOMING,” Jack roars as Torbjörn’s turrets start lighting them up -

The central Bastion pulls back about a meter, slightly into the shadows of the trees as the other four start taking fire -

*It is already shifting.*

“Moving to flank,” Gabriel informs them, “Maintain position unless I say otherwise -”

“Gabriel, you’re *hurt*, you’re not going *anywhere*,” Jack growls, even as the sentried-Bastion rattles off its Gatling gun against the shield. The two men glance at each other briefly behind Reinhardt’s back, and though Jack *knows* he’s furious and *fucking terrified* -

There is still sunlight in Gabriel’s tired, exhausted eyes.

*Gabriel understands* -

And then -

They’re already looking back at the Bastions.
“Shield giving out!” Reinhardt warns them, but Jack’s pulse shots mixed with Torbjörn’s turret fire gun down the far right one, and Gabriel shoots off another shotgun pellet against the far left one. Both of the flank Bastions collapse as Ana chimes back in, “Reloaded, ready for Earthshatter.”

“Fuck ‘em up, big guy,” Gabriel chuckles and there’s a mad grin on his face -

“HAMMER DOWN!” Reinhardt hollers cheerfully - his shield vaporizes into mist as he swings his massive hammer downward, and smashes it into the ground. The entire segment of earth around the three men trembles and shakes and cracks, the rotting leaves and topsoil shifting as the volcanic bedrock underneath snaps and shatters from the rocket-propelled pressure. Roots snap and fissure as tremors recoil through the human soldiers and the three remaining Bastions before them. Jack grabs onto Reinhardt’s armor instinctively (Gabriel somehow maintains his balance, pinche pendejo), as the rock crumbles and falls and the Bastions -

Including the one in sentry mode -

Wobble and crash and slip into the small chasm Reinhardt made.

They’re already moving.

In a fraction of a second, Jack and Gabriel are jumping out from beside the knight and rushing to the downed Omnis. Jack’s firing at the one in a discombobulated sentry mode, its body skewed out awkwardly, as Gabriel whips his shotguns forward, firing the left into the head of the one closest to him. He fires the right into the other at the same time as a sniper shot pierces its head.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-six minutes, forty-four seconds.

The Bastions are already dead.

They stand in the weighted stillness of the dying, gasping forest for a fraction of a second and then Gabriel asks coolly, “Torbjörn, ETA of hover carrier?”

“About a minute and a half, Reyes.”

...only a minute and a half.

God. Damn.

“Alright, you heard him,” Gabriel explains, “Y’all get a minute long microsleep and then the second that hover carrier gets here, I want us pushin’ the damn thing across the enemy lines. We’ve punched a hole through their front with this one, so we gotta sweep ’em from behind, understand?”

“Yessir,” the other three drone out. Reinhardt drops to his knee, sets his hammer down gently, and then lays on the ground - in a split second, his eyes are shut.

Gabriel is beside Jack in another fraction of a second.

“...Get some sleep, mi mar,” his commander says to him, and surprisingly, there’s sunshine in his smile too - a contrast to -

Jack feels something inside him snap.

*Oh hell fucking NO.*

Jack goes off.
In an instant, Jack is on him.

“Sit down right the fuck now,” Jack snarls, his normally poise-perfect face twisted with fury as he jabs a finger against Gabriel’s chestplate. Gabriel’s sleep exhaustion nearly vanishes from the sheer force of it, and he watches in wide-eyed surprise as Jack clicks the pulse rifle to his back, fuming for every fraction of a second the action takes.

Suddenly, Gabriel understands.

“...It’s just a bullet, Jack,” he mutters, but there’s a light laugh to his words and Jack -

Jack gives him a vicious glare.

“...That is NOT sitting,” his partner snarls at him and Gabriel -

He clicks his shotguns to his back and plops himself on the ground next to Reinhardt’s sleeping form.

In a fraction of a second, Jack is also beside him.

“Everything off,” Jack orders as he pulls a medkit from one of his bags. Now Gabriel scowls, growling, “This can fucking wait until after we get the carrier behind the fucking tin cans -”

“It’s not a toughness thing, Gabe - every second you leave it open like that it risks infection, especially in a fucking rainforest. And I don’t give a shit that we’re supersoldiers: you’re still human and gangrene will still fuck you up,” Jack chastises him as he tugs off his gloves and rips open a sanitizer packet. And then the soldier-medic levels a dark, submerged, and deeply merciless gaze at Gabriel, joking blithely, “And if you get it, I’m never touching you again.”

In a fraction of a second, Gabriel is undoing the cinches on the chest plate.

“...You always know just what to say to motivate me,” he chuckles dryly as he pries the plate off, but the mere action of moving his wounded right shoulder causes him to wince openly. He also flinches as he unzips his sweat-drenched hoodie, but he feels a rough, warm hand help him tug the sleeves off.

When the sweatshirt is off, Jack coats his hands and fingers in the high-grade sanitizer as Gabriel starts unzipping the front of his Kevlar torso armor too. Jack’s ruinous blue eyes flash like lightning pulses as he spots the tear in the padded, partial carbon-fiber fabric, but he mutters grimly, “Good to know I can still persuade you to care about handjobs over your health.”

Gabriel grins smugly, even though pain ripples through his shoulder and chest at the roll of pulling back the armor but -

Suddenly those rough, warm hands are pressing lightly around the wound, dripping red like rainfall drops of sunset hues.

Gabriel heaves slightly at the pain of the pressure, and also the sweet relief of Jack’s gentle touch.

“Thank fuck we wear so much armor - it’s shallow so it should be easy to get out and clean up,”
Jack murmers, those stormy eyes peering at Gabriel’s wound intensely before his hands disappear -

Suddenly, Jack is practically straddling his lap.

“Holy f*ck,” Gabriel swears, having been lulled into a momentary relaxation from being still, on the
ground, and in Jack’s soothing presence. He jolts back slightly, but Jack just titters, “Relájate,
pendejo, and stay still.”

“You could do this like a normal person, you know,” the commander grumbles with a twistedly
pleased hum to his words, and Jack just grins wryly, “I gotta get my thrills somehow, Gabi.”

“I always knew you were kinky as f*ck - OH GOD,” Gabriel starts to retort until a slick, clean pair
of tweezers dives into the bullet hole. He flinches in pain as Jack intones gently, “Squeeze my thigh
if you need to.”

“Wait, are you actually getting off on this - AY, JODER, PINCHE PENDEJO,” he hisses and Jack
scowls, eyes still focusing intently on the wound, but his words drift over Gabriel like a cool rain,
“Fucking of course not, asshole, but if you need something to hold onto, I’m here - GOT IT.”

Jack sits back on Gabriel’s thighs, his smile bright and delighted as he holds up his Operation
success. The bullet is miserably deformed, having gone through one layer of synthetic-protein
plating, another layer of ballistic padding, another layer of graphene silk and aramid, and then finally
the padded mesh of the kevlar before lodging itself several millimeters under Gabriel’s collarbone.

Jack then chucks the bullet behind him before reaching back into the medkit. Without the deformed
bullet in the hole, the wound is starting to bleed more, but Jack is back in another fraction of a
second, padding at the blood with a sterile wipe and then-

“Ay, joder, pinche pendejo,” Gabriel snaps as Jack sprays the dense, canned biotic fluid directly over the wound, the temperature-controlled mist stinging and needling sharply as the organic nanobots and their
sustaining fluid enter his bloodstream.

A fraction of a second later, and Gabriel can already feel the blood starting to coagulate.

Jack puts the cannister back in the kit, and returns with a pair of small scissors and a roll of butterfly-
closure tape. His stormcloud eyes are heavily focused on the task, his left fingers deftly yet lightly
tugging at Gabriel’s skin -

“No stitches this time?” Gabriel attempts to joke, but he twitches slightly as Jack adjusts his shoulder,
pressing some of the shorn skin back together over the wound. Jack’s eyes never leave his shoulder,
but he chuckles dryly, “I know you’ll just tear them apart in a minute and half when you start
shooting again… Between the nanobots and the tape, that should be enough to cover the worst of it
until we get back to Dorado and you can see a real medic.”

“...You practically are a real medic,” the commander murmurs patiently, watching his partner with a
deep, aching fondness that wells up from the depths of his soul.

He always has the patience to watch Jack work.

There’s something about the strange, eerie, yet brilliantly beautiful way his blue eyes seem to dance
and move when he’s this focused, like looking at up the shimmering light from beneath the surface of
the ocean -

“Yeah right,” Jack snorts, as he layers the first line of the tape over Gabriel’s skin and then snips it
off. He layers the second strip, also snipping, as he mutters, “Some days it hardly feels like I’m a real
soldier, yet here we are.”

“You’re not a real soldier,” Gabriel jokes weakly as a third strip is applied, “You’re a super soldier!”

This finally gets Jack to stop and look at him in deadass horror.

“...Holy fuck,” Jack breathes, as a wide smile finally bursts on his face like the sun from being weighted forest clouds. Gabriel shoots him a grin that’s simultaneously sheepish and smug, saying teasingly, “That bad, huh?”

“That was fucking awful,” Jack laughs brightly, airly, “Holy fuck, Gabi, that was your worst one yet.” Jack bends back over the wound, putting a fourth strip down, but this time he’s smiling, the light from beneath his water eyes glimmering and shimmering and dancing playfully.

“Give me a break, I’m fucking tired,” Gabriel chuckles. Jack just snorts before putting the tape away and pulling out another cannister. He sprays the bio-protein sealant over the rest of the wound, muttering, “Yeah, we’re all fucking tired if you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, trust me - I notice your dead ass every time the comms goes quiet,” Gabriel grunts back. Jack returns the cannister to the kit and brings out a breathable cotton padding and larger tape. As his fingers gently yet deftly place the pad, Gabriel lifts his right arm slightly so the medic-soldier-SIC can wrap him. They fall into truly brief silence as Jack works quickly, but the blonde whispers, “...We’re reaching our limit, Gabriel.”

Gabriel hates the faintest touch of fear in his voice.

Gabriel will use all his potential to destroy that shadow clawing at Jack’s heart.

… But try as he might, out here, in the dying, gasping forest -

Seventy-one hours, twenty-seven minutes, ten seconds -

He cannot break the fear in Jack.

He cannot brush aside the ashes to ashes and dust to dust in long shadows haunting the blue of Jack’s eyes.

Jack’s eyes should only be blue.

They should only be strong and soft, gentle and playful - dripping with light spun like sugar and honey, flooding like forests made of sun-filled rainclouds, dancing with a radiance lurking below the ocean’s surface and -

Gabriel watches for a fraction of a second before replying, “... It’s been damn near impossible to get information across the Omnic scatter frequencies and EMPs, but Miguel’s platoon further south got word that Portero and the Brigades are on the other side of the Alto Lucero foothills. But that was twenty minutes ago and well…”

Gabriel shrugs unevenly, which gets Jack to quirk a skeptical eyebrow at him.

But then his partner says more solemnly, “We can’t keep this pace for much longer, Gabriel.”

“...We don’t have a choice, Jack,” the commander replies.

“We do,” Jack states quietly, so quietly that the density of the forest almost absorbs his words, “We can pull back, stay with the rurales. We don’t need to push, Gabriel - we just need to maintain.”
“If we go on the offensive, we can break them,” Gabriel growls but Jack just glares at him furiously, fearfully, snapping:

“This is the eighth bullet I’ve pulled out of you in seventy-one hours.”

Gabriel knows -

“I’ve pulled five from Reinhardt, one that caught Ana at a bad angle, two from Torbjörn. I’ve lost track of the ones I’ve pulled from rurales fighters. I don’t KNOW how many biotic fields I’ve deployed, and I don’t KNOW how many pulse stocks I’ve used up, but I KNOW we’re getting close to running out of both of these, even through our supply lines.”

Jack practically hurls the medical tape into the medkit, snarling, “These are my last canisters of direct biotic fluid and protein patchers. This is my last roll of butterfly tape.”

The two men - one still straddling the other’s lap - glare at each other intensely until Jack’s face -

Jack’s face fills with fear.

_That fucking terrifies Gabriel._

“...I’m not a real medic, Gabriel,” Jack whispers in grieving horror, “If you take a bullet in a bad spot, there will be _nothing_ I can do. And if we keep going we’re gonna hit a wall where I won’t even be able to patch you up from the easy ones.”

Jack gives him a breaking smile:

“I could watch you fight for the rest of our lives, and I know your limits are on a different fucking plane of existence than the rest of us, but please, Gabriel - _please realize that you have limits._”

Gabriel shuts his eyes.

Surrounded by the cool, soothing darkness, feeling the dense weight of Jack against him, he whispers:

“I break all my limits for you - for us.”

“I don’t want you to -” Jack’s voice reaches out to him as rough, warm hands - wet faintly with his own blood - cup at his face, and the raincloud voice whispers back, “I don’t want to see you _broken_ too.”

Gabriel opens his eyes.

He looks into Jack’s face.

He looks at sunlight’s shimmering radiance from beneath the ocean’s surface.

He looks at Jack.

He says quietly - strong and soft, gentle and true:

“I trust you to fix me when I break.”

Jack shuts his eyes in tremendous pain, his rainstorm voice cracking with tears at the seams:

“I can’t _fix_ everything, Gabriel. I can’t _fix_ death.”
When Jack opens his eyes again, they reflect each other, water over light and light beneath water.

Jack stares at him, and states with surprising authority:

“... We can follow your plan for now, but the moment this is over we need to talk about priorities.”

“... Agreed,” Gabriel replies, more than willing to let Jack be strong and soft, gentle and confident in this one. And then the commander smirks a cracked grin, “Because believe me, jackass, I’ve got some choice words for you -”

“Hover carrier is here,” Torbjörn’s voice crackles over the comms and beside them, Reinhardt stirs slightly at the sound. In the trees, they hear Ana shift somewhere. And then -

In a fraction of a second -

Jack kisses Gabriel.

The commander is caught off-guard by the suddenness of rough, warm lips - strong and soft, gentle and playful, yet... urgent, with a twist of haste - that press against his. In another fraction of a second, Gabriel kisses back, reflecting Jack’s tender yet slightly frenzied need, feeling the -

 Feeling the fear that laces the moment.

Jack tastes like blood and sweat, like exhaustion and weighted breath, like honey and sugar and salt, and though he’s heavy, and dense, and solid, something about the soothing, bittersweet ache to the moment makes Jack feel


Utterly beyond reach.

Gabriel does not understand but it -

It fucking terrifies him.

First there is the feeling of sweet sundrop clouds against his skin, warm, weighted lips against his, fingers slick with sanitizer and red red red blood on his cheeks, Jack physical and strong and tangible and then -

The moment is gone as quickly as it came.

In his exhausted, heavy-minded state, Gabriel thinks it might have been just a vivid as fuck microdream.

Jack has rolled back onto his feet and is sliding the medkit back into a pocket. Gabriel watches in a slightly surreal daze as the soldier - Gabriel’s blood still on his hands - tugs his gloves back on, muttering coolly into the comms, “We read you, Torb. ETA: fifteen seconds.”

“... The suppliers are saying this is the last of everything that was on our ship,” Torbjörn’s voice comes across gruff and slightly fearful, cracking at the seams as Reinhardt finally sits up, yawning widely. Gabriel gingerly slides his right arm back into his kevlar suit as Torbjörn continues, “We’re gonna hit critical mass real soon, friends. Looks like we got enough stuff to last us another few attacks but -”

His words stop suddenly.
Seventy-one hours, twenty-eight minutes, thirty seconds.

The remaining Strike Team freezes.

When the comms resume from their engineer, it’s filled with the sound of yelling and gunfire:

“DAMN - I -” Torbjörn’s voice is sputtering in and out of weighted existence, “Moreee e- - Droness - - - EMPss - - inbooound -”

The comms line from Torbjörn goes dead.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-eight minutes, thirty-four seconds.

The three ground soldiers are on their feet.

---------

Segador y Soldado: Sacrificarse

Gabriel is struggling to yank his soaking hoodie back on as he turns to Reinhardt, “Go. We’ll meet you there. Take Ana with you.” Jack sighs, helping the commander tug his right arm through the sleeve.

“Understood!” the Crusader responds forcefully as there’s a dull, leafy thud on the ground behind them, and then Ana is by their side, her main sniper rifle slung over her back and her “side arm” assault rifle in her hands instead. She nods to Gabriel and Jack before accepting Reinhardt’s large left hand. In a flash, she’s climbing his arm and torso like a monkey in a tree - or perhaps a sniper to their nest - and clings to his left shoulder, snapping to him, “Let’s go, سراـف!”

“Right away,” Reinhardt shouts, and squares himself to the left, directly down the old, overgrown trail.

Gabriel and Jack take a half step back.

The rockets on the back of Reinhardt’s armor flare into life and then -

The protector and the ghostly sniper are roaring off into the weighted cloud forest.

The two soldiers watch them tear into the brightly-colored shadows in silence, before Gabriel sighs, “You should go after them -”

“I am not leaving you.”

The words escape Jack’s throat with a harsh, ragged sound, and he gives an exhausted, furious glare to Gabriel. Gabriel just returns the favor with his patented scowl, before sighing, “I won’t do anything reckless, Jack. They need your biotic fields as soon as possible -”

“They HAVE the rest of my biotic fields, Gabriel. It literally involves pressing a button, which is Torbjörn’s specialty anyways,” Jack snaps sarcastically, but it manages to get a dark chuckle out of his commander all the same. Gabriel bends down to grab his chestplate, saying a touch too casually, “Well, I guess that’s true. They could use your pulse rifle -”

Gabriel stops moving and for a second Jack thinks he’s fallen asleep -
But then he hears it.

A slow, soft chirp-chirp cooing, like the calls of a songbird, sings out through the weighted sunfall mists of the forest, like flashes of the color green in energy form. The sound is close, very close, only about a meter west and up from them -

The two soldiers look at each other.

...In the past seventy-one hours, twenty-eight minutes, thirty-nine seconds -

*There have not been animals in the forest.*

The sound *fucking terrifies them.*

Because there is only one thing that would willingly enter a dying, gasping forest of war to sing for many to hear -

“*Quetzal,*” Gabriel nearly chokes on the word as Jack is unclipping the pulse rifle from his back, his eyes scanning the treeline. Once the pulse rifle is back in his left hand, his right fingers are tapping at the blueglass buttons, switching out to:

[Quetzal Scout tracking: ON]

A square reticle lights up off to his left and he’s shifting the aim of his pulse rifle up to the dense canopy -

But it’s already a second too late.

Seventy-one hours, twenty-eight minutes -

Fifty-nine seconds -

Ten large, looming figures hulk out of the brightly-colored shadows west across the trail.

Jack’s already pulling the trigger -

Out of the tree, a long, green-painted serpentine body falls, the pulse shot leaving a massive hole in part of its elongated torso and one of its jade-light wings, and the chirp-chirp cooing stops as the Quetzal Scout Omnic falls dead but -

Torbjörn’s turrets start firing into the shadows -

Seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes -

Zero seconds.

Gabriel’s only managed to get his chestplate halfway on, his left hand pulling out one of the shotguns, pointing to the closest Bastion unit -

Gabriel’s already pulling the trigger -

Despite the close range, his shot misses *entirely*

And the world slips sideways as something heavy and dense and solid launches itself into him -

Jack *goes.*
He moves on instinct and old habits and pure fear alone, throwing himself at Gabriel, sending the both of them sideways and backwards into the dense undergrowth as Bastion submachine gun fire fills the air where they had been standing. They land on the rotting leaves of the dying, gasping forest floor, and Gabriel grunts as the pressure of landing wrong on half of his plate armor jars his only partially-healed right shoulder. Jack’s mere physical existence drags on his exhausted consciousness, and the commander -

Gabriel is screaming out of instinct and old habits and -

**JACK, RUN, JACK, RUN, JACK -**

“**GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE,**” Gabriel snarls at him, as he uses his right arm to push Jack back and -

In a fraction of a second -

Seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes -

One second -

Jack moves back slightly and -

Gabriel’s light-dark eyes, flaked with red and gold and amber, are wide and horrified and -

*Let there be light.*

(There is only one way forward now:)

Seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes -

One second -

Jack gives him a heartbreaking smile.

(Through the valley of the shadow of death, down the circles of Hell, into the ashes to ashes and dust to dust of the apocalypse -)

*It fucking terrifies him* -

*Let there be light in his eyes.*

“...When you knocked the shit outta Max Jones in Basic,” Jack says with weighted serenity, “I thought you were the most badass person I’d ever seen.”

Gabriel -

“**Qué chingados?**” he stammers -

*Gabriel does not understand* -

“And ever since that day, you’ve still been the most badass person I’ve ever met,” Jack laughs lightly as several Bastions bweep and there’s the clanking of metal as they *shift*. There’s the sound of metal shredding as the firing from Torbjörn’s turrets come to a breaking halt -

“**YOU NEED TO RUN, ASSHOLE -**” Gabriel shouts at him, practically spitting with fearful *rage* and *fire* and what is *happening*, why does it hurt, why does his *soul* hurt so *bad* -
Make it better, Jack -

I’m going to try, Gabriel -

“And now,” Jack says calmly, shifting slightly to his knees, as he adjusts the pulse rifle in his hands, “I want to thank you for showing me true art. That left hook was fucking inspiring.”

Oh fuck, Jack, NO -

As turret fire begins to destroy the forest around them, Jack grins at him:

“Thank you for the last nine years.”

“No, fucking shit, asshole, RUN -”

Nine years, five days, seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes -

Two seconds.

Jack’s eyes take on the dangerous, deadly, furious focus of a hurricane -

And he’s twisting the pulse rifle back to the west, flicking a switch -

Several small rockets shoot out of an auxiliary barrel and explode a short ways off as several Bastions scream -

Three seconds.

In the disorienting chaos and weighted sunfall air, Jack rises and -

It fucking terrifies Gabriel -

This moment fucking terrifies him -

Jack pulls his last biotic field from the slot on his chestplate, just beneath his heart -

He snaps the button and the world fills with a bright, liquid life light -

Dewdrop dawn drips of milk-honey radiance cast themselves into the weighted sunfall mist air -

And

For a fraction of a second

The two of them are gilded gold with the fluid fire.

Four seconds.

Jack hefts the heavy pulse rifle against his right shoulder, before clicking the buttons on the blueglass:

[Tactical Targeting: ON]

Eight reticles light up in his sights.

He’s already pulling the trigger.
One of the Bastions in the center - weakened by the helix rockets - dies with only two more pulse shots to its core.

He’s already focusing on the next one.

Five seconds.

Seven Bastions left.

He’s firing at the other rocket-weakened Bastion - two more pulse shots, and it falls -

Six.

A submachine gun bullet pierces into his left shoulder, and the biotic field immediately takes the edge off the pain - another submachine gun bullet rips into his thigh, deadened only briefly by the ballistic padding and kevlar and nanoboosters and -

Something is pulling him back into the undergrowth.

Someone is pulling him back into the undergrowth -

“PINCHE PENDEJO, PINCHE IDIOTA, FUCKING DUMBASS .”

Gabriel is pulling him back into the undergrowth -

A shotgun blast obliterated the face of the Bastion on their left.

Five.

Jack falls back into the undergrowth. As he glances to his left, where his commander crouches beside him, only half a chestplate on, he catches a glimpse of Gabriel’s light-dark eyes - he’s always found them beautiful and deep, rich with honey and spun sugar and smoke, flaked with red amaranth and gold dust and amber shards -

Gabriel’s eyes burn.

They burn like the longest night giving way to the weighted dawn.

Jack understands.

There is still light today.

Nine years, five days, seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes -

Seven seconds.

Gabriel’s sunflared eyes twist to Jack’s hurricane gaze and -

“I SWEAR TO FUCKING GOD,” he roars at Jack, “I’M GONNA KICK YOUR FUCKING ASS FOR ALL THE STUPID SHIT YOU PULL .”

Nine years, five days, seventy-one hours, twenty-nine minutes, and seven seconds of instincts and old habits and being together snaps into place -

“I’d like to see you fucking try,” is out of Jack’s mouth in a fraction of a second.

Gabriel’s burning gaze immediately cools to utter bewilderment and even Jack finds himself blinking
at his own words in surprise and -

There’s suddenly a Bastion standing over them, submachine gun arm pointed at them -

They’re already pulling the triggers.

Exploding shotgun pellets and liquid lightning pulses break the Bastion’s head into thousands of pieces and the Omnic falls, even as they continue to huddle in the undergrowth and -

Jack beams a shit-eating smile at Gabriel.

Gabriel scowls his patented glare at Jack.

Suddenly, there are four submachine gun barrels pointing at them from over the undergrowth -

They have one fraction of a second to understand -

It fucking terrifies them.

The thought of this being the end of them fucking terrifies them -

BANG!

The shot cracks through sight and sound and weighted existence itself, and a fraction of a second later -

All four Bastions fall over -

Their heads completely split apart.

The looks of pure inscrutable shock on their faces can only be described as:

**Holy fucking shit what**

“QUADRUPLE HEADSHOT,” Ana’s voice crackles across both comms and forest air, “HOLY SHIT MOM, GET THE CAMERA.” It is followed a second later by Reinhardt’s booming laughter and a loud “I need a fucking nap” from Torbjörn.

Gabriel nearly chokes on his sigh of relief.

Jack falls backwards into the decaying, rotting undergrowth of the forest.

They sit like that for a long second as they listen to the other three members of the Strike Team march and chatter and shout towards them, the dull whine of the hover carrier underlying their conversation -

“...We need to have a serious chat about priorities,” Gabriel says.

“...Can it be after I sleep for three days?” Jack asks.

“...Yeah, sure. Fuck it. I don’t care,” Gabriel replies. He grunts and rises, muttering, “Let’s get behind their fucking lines and get those fucking bullets out of you. And then we’ll go find Portero and fucking annihilate these fuckers.”

“...You give the most inspiring motivational speeches,” Jack states dryly.

Suddenly, there’s a gloved hand in his sights.
Jack -

He shrugs off the weight of exhaustion and near-death clinging to him, lifts his hand -

And lets Gabriel pull him up from the rotting undergrowth.

--------

Time of the confirmed death of the last Bastion unit: Sunday, July 9, 2051: 1602 (04:02 p.m.) - in the foothills of the Sierra de Chiconquiaco, just east of Laguna Verde, in the municipality of Alto Lucero de Gutiérrez Barrios, located in the State of Veracruz, Mexico

Time since the Mexico State Omnium forces attacked: 72 hours, 11 minutes, 48 seconds

Time since the Overwatch Strike Team arrived in Dorado: 71 hours, 42 minutes, 13 seconds

The Overwatch Strike Team sneaks behind the Omnic siege lines and unites with General de Brigada DEM Guillermo Portero’s joint Distrito de Federico and Quinto Zona Militar forces.

Shortly after, the last Bastion squadron is destroyed.

Due to the density of the forest and the spread of the fighting, the exact counts of Human and Omnic forces slain remain unknown. It is estimated nearly two-hundred rurales defenders and six-hundred Dorado civilians were killed in the three-day battle.

It is estimated that nearly fifteen-hundred Omnic forces were destroyed.

The anti-Omnic tactics utilized by Overwatch in La Batalla de Setenta y Dos continue to be taught by covert operations divisions and guerrilla fighters the world over. It is rumored that Overwatch and Blackwatch recruits were taught to practice fighting simulations in the foothills of the Sierra de Chiconquiaco.

By orders of Strike-Commander Morrison and the Overwatch Environmental Sciences Division, the cloud and moist forests around the delineation of Dorado’s city limits are considered an UNESCO World Heritage site and Biosphere Reserve.

In the fifteen years since La Batalla de Setenta y Dos, the biodiversity of the forests has slowly recovered to an estimated 50% of its original numbers and statistics.

As part of an on-going effort to improve the relationship between humanity and the forests, the citizens of Dorado have left wide swaths of forest plants and trees in between city streets on the edges of the town. Mahogany and Ceiba Trees are left standing where they are found. Gifts of food, water, sugar skulls, candy, and flowers can still be found at the base of the urban trees in July (Aniversario de las Setenta y Dos Horas), the end of October (La Festival de la Luz), and the beginning of November (Dia de los Muertos).

As a sign of good faith during the negotiations for the Human-Omnic Accord Act, a memorial to the fallen Omnic units was placed on the western perimeter of the biosphere reserve.

In the late 2060’s, Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant workers noted that the maximized energy outputs were straining the outdated system and risked a potential failure. Overwatch Energy Sciences Division monitors agreed with the opinion and tasked the Mexican Government with decommissioning the plant and building an improved, safer energy system instead. The Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant was finally decommissioned and closed in July of 2071, eighty years after it opened on July 29, 1990.
In its place, the Mexican Government announces a partnership with the new energy company LumériCo to provide a more efficient fusion-based energy across the country.

Just hours before the announcement of the partnership goes live across Mexico -

A member of the anti-corporation, anti-oligarchy gang Los Muertos turns on her computer -

And reads a message from a bounty hunter in the Middle East.

‘En honor a los caídos durante la oscuridad'

[In honor of those who fell during the darkness]

‘Que renazcan en la luz'

[May they be reborn in the light]

‘Y que jamás sean olvidados'

[And that they may never be forgotten]

‘Hasta la noche más oscura cede ante el amanecer'

[Even the darkest night breaks to the dawn]

Chapter End Notes

Every time I reread this chapter, I end up worrying if they're gonna survive the second round of Bastions - and then I remember that, not only are they both still alive (well...1.5 alive), I also wrote this dumb thing. I know the ending. I planned it. I wrote it. What the hell.

Next week: we get the "title drop" chapter - a hero who loses his heart can only ever be a vigilante...

(Also, to the person who commented about the lack of Reaper76 - the rest of the fic is focused on them, I promise. The Battle of Eichenwalde is the longest break between Reaper and 76’s perspectives pretty much...ever, lol.)
Overwatch: Hero

Chapter Summary

Old habits die hard as a soldier tries to remember what it means to be a hero.

Is justice more important than hope?

Chapter Notes

ESTA AQUI!!!

It's been one helluva ride, y'all, but we did it - we made it.

We're finally at the "title drop" chapter.

Obviously, the ride isn't over, but seriously, big shout out to everyone who continues to keep up with this! Gears are really starting to get into motion, and characters are starting to collide. Thank you so much for all your support and encouragement!

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Warning: this chapter contains scenes of explicit violence, disassociation, and depersonalization. It is shot-for-shot the same as the animation, but also contains 76's internal thoughts.

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Hero

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Song is "How Did You Love" by Shinedown (Youtube link)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Hero

You can have the sound of a thousand voices calling your name

You can have the light of the world blind you, bathe you in grace

But I don't see so easily what you hold in your hands
'Cause castles crumble, kingdoms fall and turn into sand

---------

**Strike: Commander**

January 6, 2051: 10:14 a.m. - United Nations Headquarters, New York City, United States

“Excellencies! Ambassadors and envoys! Heads of State and Government! Friends and family! Peoples of all nations, one world - I would like to thank you for coming together with us on this important day.”

Jack watches with a calm yet tense patience as Gabrielle Adawe speaks fondly and openly to the General Assembly. She stands before the grand marble podium, gesturing with that same vibrant, heartfelt energy she has always generated, her voice clear and bright as she addresses the crowd. The General Assembly room is - as always - warm and radiant, bright wood paneling and dark marble accents, lit with pale shimmering lights that should feel cold and chilled but somehow reflect upon the gold tint of the architecture and make it comfortable instead. The styling *feels* like it should be dated, but there is an ephemeral timelessness to it - to the chilled yet warm lighting, the echoing gold-wood paneling, the dark seams of polished rock underneath.

The group before them is mainly United Nations Ambassadors and Representatives, but gathered in the second tier are family and friends, and Jack is aware that somewhere up there, his mother Marianne is sitting quietly, but probably just as tensely as he is. He imagines that Isabella Reyes has attempted to joke to her a few times to help her relax, but knowing his mother it has probably only added to her anxieties.

Somewhere in the second tier, probably close to Marianne Morrison and Isabella Reyes, are six-year-old Fareeha Amari and “her new best friend,” Torb’s niece, Angela Ziegler. Jack can practically picture how Fareeha’s leg must be bouncing with impatience, as Angela leans over and whispers something to her aunt, Ingrid Lindholm, who gives that characteristic, serene smile in response - twisted with just a faint hint of mischief.

Up on stage, the main members of Overwatch stand to Adawe’s right, just back slightly from being perfectly level with her podium. Jack is positioned the closest, feeling rather overtaken in his formal Overwatch dress blues, hearing the soft clinking of metal on metal, stars on stars, with each slow, rhythmic breath he takes. His fingers feel stiff in his white gloves, flexing and folding anxiously at his sides.

He is not ready for this moment.

He has practiced, over and over and over, in the mirror, in his office, in his rooms, in front of Gabriel’s amused smirk, over and over and over -

And yet he still is not ready.

He does not feel ready.

He -

A hand brushes quietly - rough and warm, yet gentle, so gentle - against his right folded fist.
Ever so minutely, Jack glances to his side.

Dressed head-to-toe in the most formal uniform dress attire Jack has ever seen on him, Gabriel’s head is still stiff, facing forward, facing the crowd and the lights, yet those light-dark eyes, filled with the faintest flakes of red and gold and amber, flick towards him. A brief scowl flutters on his rich-toned face and then -

A smug, radiant smirk.

Gabriel is enjoying himself immensely.

...Asshole.

Gabriel notes the way Jack’s eyebrows quirk into the quickest glare he’s ever seen, before his features smooth back out into picturesque tranquility and poise. The poor idiot’s been an increasingly nervous ball of anxiety, steadily building himself into a fucked-up trainwreck that crashed and imploded on itself this morning when he had shouted in their hotel bedroom, “I CAN’T DO THIS, I’M GONNA FUCK THIS UP.”

“I told you to keep your speech short and sweet, but nah, you didn’t listen to me,” Gabriel had chuckled as he’d straightened out his medals in the mirror. Jack - only partially dressed - had flopped backwards on the bed, sighing loudly, “I’m not taking advice from the worst public speaker I’ve ever met.”

“Guess who’s never giving you advice ever again, asshole,” Gabriel had muttered before turning around and gesturing to him. Jack’s gold-blonde hair, completely ruffled and fluffed and a tragic, unruly mess in general, had popped up as his partner had looked at him with concerned assessment before sighing loudly again and pulling himself up off the bed. He had trudged over to Gabriel, who had picked up Jack’s dress jacket off the chair -

Gabriel had held out the sleeves as Jack had slotted himself into it, turning around to put it on. And then -

Gabriel had wrapped his arms around Jack’s waist, doing up the buttons for him, leaning his head on Jack’s right shoulder, murmuring, “...You were made for this, Jack.”

“...I’m not ready, Gabriel,” he had said, rumbling back against Gabriel’s chest, but Gabriel had just pressed a calm kiss to the crook of his jaw, just below his ear, whispering, “You are the only person ready for this. Remember - I’m with you.”

“...And I, with you,” Jack had replied softly, as his right hand had gone to cradle the side of Gabriel’s face -

Even now, under bright lights and the close scrutiny of hundreds of people, Gabriel beams at Jack, mouthing silently, “I’m with you.” The tension melts off Jack’s face, and he smiles back faintly, “And I, with you.” Gabriel hears Torbjörn huff slightly beside him, and Ana shifts a little beyond him. Behind the original Strike members, Emre whispers something to Mei, who giggles, and Gabriel’s scowl returns.

He’ll have to chide the new recruits on respect and manners later.

And Mei - she should know better by now.

“- As the world enters its sixth year since the official end of the Omnic Crisis, its priorities have started to shift once again,” Adawe is saying to the crowd, “And with it, so too have the purpose and
focus of Overwatch, tasked with its protection and defense. As we move forward from an era of reconstruction, we must look to the future, to an era of resolution, an era of resplendence, an era of renewed humanity in all its wealths: creativity and innovation, spirit and hope, strength and generosity.

“No longer is Overwatch here to guide us from the ashes of the Crisis, the wreckage of war, but now, as we shift our gaze from the potential of promise and prosperity to the fulfillment of it, Overwatch will transform from a task force of defense and aid, to one that I and many others hope and believe will lead us into the brightest future, the best world, the greatest potential humanity can achieve,” Adawe states boldly and proudly, opening her arms wide.

Jack tenses.

Gabriel’s faint smile melts in his mind -

Down into the core of his soul and -

He inhale-exhales -

One-two -

“Overwatch shall shift its focus from helping the world transition out of the darkness, out of the longest night, out of the ruins of our history, to a new focus, one that centers on creativity and innovation, spirit and hope, strength and generosity. It is my honor and privilege to announce to you on this grand day that the United Nations has approved moving Overwatch from its transitional period into its peacekeeping era. Starting today, Overwatch shall no longer be a task force in defense of peace, but will now be an engine to drive and develop it, to create and innovate it, to imbue it with spirit and hope, strength and generosity, compassion and justice,” Adawe informs the selection of humanity before them, under bright lights that should be cold but are warm instead.

“...I’m with you.”

As long as his friends and family, his team and his comrades, his ideas and his dreams are here -

His heart and soul and sunshine standing by his side -

Jack has nothing to fear.

He inhale-exhales -

Three-four.

He opens his eyes.

He is ready now.

“To help lead Overwatch under its new goals and ideals, I am proud to introduce someone who has long been an inspiration to me and those around him. I am honored and privileged to call this man a friend and a role model, a genuine force for all that is good and true in the world, a representative of all that Overwatch has achieved since its foundation in 2047, a human being who has shown all of Overwatch’s brightest colors and boldest dreams from the very beginning.”

He was made for this.

He was made to pick up the pieces of the world, broken by war and disease and hatred and loss -
He was made to put those pieces back together, but not just to fix them -

But to make them into something new, something greater.

Something better.

“And now, to speak on the new goals and objectives of the task force, I present to you: Strike-Commander Jack Morrison, the next leader of Overwatch in its peacetime era.”

Even before Gabrielle’s words die down, there are murmurs filling the room. Behind the Strike team, Emre gives a loud, “WHAT,” and Gabriel reminds himself for the second time in a minute that he needs to teach that private to mind his goddamn manners. Beside him, Torbjörn gives a loud gasping cough and beside Torb, Ana flinches in shock. Beyond her, Reinhardt breaks formation to look at the team, his good eye wide and open and confused.

...Scratch that.

Gabriel (of all people) will have to teach all of them to mind their goddamn manners.

Beside him, Jack gives one last deep breath -

And then Jack goes.

The new Strike-Commander turns, taking a new position directly beside Gabrielle as she tells the crowd chattering in low volumes,” Jack Morrison has been Second-in-Commander of Overwatch since its inception. From the very beginning, Morrison has been a crucial component of the team, dedicating his heart and soul to ensuring that the task force achieved its greatest victories during the Crisis, and in the aftermath, committing his ideas and energies to helping Post-Crisis Overwatch deliver aid and support to the most affected communities and regions of the world. Morrison has single handedly developed Overwatch’s new Medical Aid and Environmental Sciences Divisions, and he has provided valuable input and innovations in the Tactics and Strategies, Engineering, and Structural Divisions. All members of Overwatch, many members of the General Assembly, and people the world over speak highly and fondly of his work and accomplishments.”

By the grace of god, Jack somehow does not blush or fluster under the sudden onslaught of praise, but his fingers clench slightly behind his back.

“In the beginning, many had their worries that Overwatch would even be able to affect the outcome of the Crisis. Fears and concerns were the first thing Commander Reyes expressed to me, and even I had my doubts about whether Overwatch would succeed,” Gabrielle says loudly, with the faintest touches of honesty in her words, raw and unedged. But then -

Her tone shifts.

Her words grow warm and brightly-colored:

“But Morrison never gave up hope. He didn't just meet our expectations for what Overwatch and its agents could achieve: he shattered them.”

And now Jack -

Jack would pick up those shattered pieces -

“Jack Morrison is a visionary and a true hero, not just to Overwatch, but to the world as a whole. I am excited and pleased to anticipate the changes he has in store for the task force, as well as the ideas
and hopes he has for enacting the United Nations’ grander ideals for bettering human rights efforts and prosperity,” Gabrielle says with a cheerful smile as she turns to look at him. Jack returns the smile, grinning at her infectious energy as she steps away from the podium.

And now Jack -

He collects those shattered pieces of hopes and dreams, stardust and frozen raindrops, the liquid of life and lacquer of gold -

He is ready.

He takes his place at the podium.

At last.

At long last.

He can start building a new world.

He can start building a better world.

Slightly beside and behind him, Gabriel smirks, thinking with vicious vibrancy, Knock ‘em dead, Jack.

Jack inhales-exhales -

And then -

Jack goes off.

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You can be an angel of mercy or give into hate

You can try to fight it just like every other careless mistake

How do you justify, I’m mystified by the ways of your heart

With a million lies the truth will rise to tear you apart

Whoa

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Fading Glory: On the Trail of Jack Morrison

By Olympia Shaw, July 6, 2076 (fun fact, in American dating, this is 7/6/76)

I remember the day Jack Morrison died. It was the day the world lost a hero.

Like other members of the so-called "Overwatch Generation," I spent my childhood looking up to
Morrison. He taught me that heroes were real. He made me believe that even I could be one. When he died under mysterious circumstances five years ago, I felt as if a part of my childhood died with him.

The details about his death have always remained few and far between, a strange fact, given that he was such a public figure. Maybe that's why after all this time, I find myself looking back at Morrison's life and asking the big question: what really happened to the man who defined my generation?

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“I worry about Alejandra - Every. Day. No longer a child and nowhere near grown-up. She is at a crossroads. I tell her about the heroes who saved our world time and time again... because I want to give her hope...”

“... But I am afraid that she could be forced to make a choice that will decide the direction of her life.”

--------

Soldado: Old Habits

Monday, July 6, 2076: 8:22 p.m. - Dorado, Mexico

The sun is setting into long shades of blue, dipping into the draw of the twilight.

Despite all the lights in the city, the stars begin to sparkle and shine, like raindrops frozen in time.

They’re faint against the velvet of the sky slowly rotating into slumber, but he can see them.

Granted, 76 is not really focusing on them right now -

As he drags the dickwad of an asshole back into the alley by the fucker’s right ankle.

“NO - NO, PLEASE - NO -” the jerkoff shouts, pleads, begging, dragging and scraping and shredding his fingernails on the dull, boring concrete pavement, as 76 pulls him back into the fuller, deeper shadows between the buildings. The punk’s bare chest is catching on small snags and the rough texture of the concrete, chunks of his fingernails are the only trace of his existence, the echoes of his cries deadened by the sunshine-bright building on one side and the peachier-painted building on the other. And all 76 can think is:

They’re really fucking committed to speaking English -

Before he turns and socks the dude with the butt of the heavy pulse rifle.

...Hard.

“Gonna need you to shut the fuck up for a hot second, pendejo,” 76 growls lowly as the punk’s body
goes slack and all that’s left of him - the only trace of his existence - is a droning moan.

76 drops his ankle and leans down to grab him by his neck instead, adjusting his grip as he drags him off to the side, hearing the footsteps of more asshats coming to fucking try him.

...He is, admittedly -

A little off-track.

He had tried - oh, he had fucking tried - to double-down and focus on scoping out LumériCo. He’d spent the last two days keeping a close eye on the brand new pyramid power plant (not that it was difficult to do, what with how… ostentatious it is), promising clean energy to the city and beyond. He’d observed every entrance and exit - even the ones over the water, where specialized boats of some sort had access to the intake pipes below the surface. He’d monitored employees going in and out, guard schedules, rotation shifts, deliveries.

Gabriel had always said that he stood out like a bright gold thumb on stealth missions but hooo, boy -

He’d been pretty fucking stealth on this one.

He’d even picked out a few marks as potential sources of access keycards, which was, by most standards, pretty reasonable work for a day and a half of stealthing it.

But the problem -

And there was always a fucking problem -

Was that other people were not stealthy.

In fact, Los Muertos was blatant as fuck.

The sheer weight of their glo-painted presence hung like a dirge over the city of lights, like a suffocating cloud of sunfall raindrops and moss drip-drip-dripping blood red and oil black. They mingled in every brightly-colored shadow, hovered on the edge of every pastel building, sneered from every velvet darkness in the alleys. They marred the sharp salty tang of the seabreeze and sunlight with the scent of smoke and explosive powder and ash. They drew looks of fear and anxiety, anger and bitterness from the other residents. They pulled quiet, hoarse whispers through gritted teeth, long and dark and full of shadows.

The air here is supposed to feel lighter -

Yet their mere existence drags it down into the undergrowth.

On his way back from scoping LumériCo yesterday, he’d felt the air shift - from light to heavy - as he strode by a deeper course between buildings, the shadows submerging it in oil black darkness but -

“NO - POR FAVOR, NO! -”

The voice had carried a strong electronic dulcet to it, gripping the focus of 76’s attention almost immediately -

An Omnic -

Before it was followed by a sickening crunching noise.
And when 76 had turned his gaze into the darker, submerged depths of the shadows -

He’d seen brightly-colored deaths - glowing like skeletons born from neon sunsets - looking back at him.

One of them had their right boot on an Omnic head, blue sparks still snapping, arms still twitching and jerking, even as the lights of the faceplate struggled to glow -

“...You didn’t see nothing,” a pink skull had told him, as a purple one had snarled, “Get the fuck outta here, old man.”

…He fucking hates bullies.

*Overwatch had offered humanity a revelation of betterment -*

But more than he hates bullies -

*And humanity called for his head -*

Jack fucking hates senseless violence.

*And put a knife in the only heart he had ever wanted to protect -*

“...This city has been watered by too much blood already for you assholes to poison the well,” 76 had stated to them as he had squared up in the end of the alleyway. He had not been bringing his tactical visor, heavy pulse rifle, or even his leather jacket on his little recon trips (because he wasn’t a fucking asshole), but he hadn’t needed them for this.

He had only needed a few seconds.

…When he had used up those few seconds, his knuckles had been broken and cracked, drip-drip-dripping red and neon pink, gold and neon orange, amber and neon purple. Their bodies had been limp, their colors ran and bled, staining the cobblestones with fluorescent lighting like eerie alien lichen.

The lights on the Omnic’s faceplate had already faded.

Painted, glowing blood and slick black oil -

Watering the heart of the city.

Seventy-one hours, forty-two minutes, twenty-one seconds.

The amount of time he has spent defending Dorado from the weight of death -

Shielding the light of the Longest Day - cresting over the eastern ocean - with his own body.

*All he has left are the bloodstream memories that lead him to the sea -*

*And the promise of the dawn.*

So today, he has let himself get a little off-track -

Because really - what’s the weight of another day of war?

So he’d donned his usual gear, hoisted his second-oldest companion - stocked with liquid lightning
pulses - to his right shoulder -

And followed the brightly-colored deaths to this corner of the city of lights.

He’s not blind – even under the dull streetlamps and the fading pastel colors of the sun, he could see the winged-skull and chains symbol stamped on the crates in the corner of the alley. It’s been less than a week since half of their members had been gunned down beneath sandstone cliffs, but it seemed like not even death stopped Deadlock from pursuing their industry. As he’d watched the two dummies mill about while “guarding” the drop before the rest of their fuckwad nightlight crew could show up, as he’d waited for the draw of the twilight to mask his movements, as he’d waited for the stars to sparkle and shine to show him that even raindrops frozen in time can be beautiful –

All 76 could hear in smoky, bittersweet whispers and aching, bloodstream memories is:

There are no coincidences.

The winged-skulls and chains, stamped on boxes guarded by brightly-colored deaths, in the city of lights, overburdened with the weight of the existence of a seaglass pyramid promising a better future which he already knows is impossible to achieve –

There are only connections between larger forces we do not yet have the understanding to perceive.

76 knows.

He knows it is impossible to achieve –

Because he has already tried.

And if Overwatch could not do it with the brightest minds and the bravest hearts and the boldest souls –

If Overwatch could not do it with armies of doctors and scientists, visionaries and adventurers –

If they could not do it together, Jack hand in hand with he who had stopped destruction with destruction, waged war against war itself, battled death with death –

Then no one could.

But still –

But still –

He has to try.

So he can afford to spend more time getting just a little bit off-track.

He shifts his stance, dragging the limp motherfucker with him, squaring up his shoulders against the frame of the two buildings. True night is settling over them, the warm navy darkness rushing to envelop them like the incoming tide. He watches as the two newcomers step out from behind the sunshine-yellow building, one of them approaching the semi-dazed “guard” on the ground, murmuring to him, “Hey, c’mon, compa - get up.”

All that separates them from him is time –

Seventy-one hours, forty-two minutes –
Twenty-two seconds.

And the dull glow of the streetlamps, struggling to keep the blue-velvet, stardust nightfall at bay.

... Apagando las luces, is all he thinks -

Before he fucking *hurls* the asshole’s body directly at the power box on the far wall of the cross-street.

The punk slams into the weak metal of the electric box, the combined force of the weight of his body and 76’s superhuman throw absolutely *crushing* the damn thing, causing bright blue sparks of lightning pulses to zap and zing. The man screams screams screams in sheer *agony* as something in his lower back - or perhaps several ribs - snap and the electric current floods his systems.

*Uno.*

There’s just enough dull streetlamp glow for 76 to see the *fear* overwhelm the two standing Los Muertos members -

Their faces flicker between living and dead as the power surges and struggles under the weight of their friend’s existence - one painted with the vibrancy of green, the other dipped in the mystique of purple -

There’s just enough dull streetlamp glow for 76 to see the shuddering shadows cover them in brightly-colored bones of paint -

*Dos.*

The power spits and strains -

The third member - his painted skin-bones as brightass pink as his mohwak - rises -

76 bristles with a pure, unbridled *rush* at the terror cast upon that half-skull face, long and dark and full of brightly-colored shadows -

*Trés.*

He takes a half-step back into the inky blackness of the alley.

*Cuatro.*

And then the stardusted night floods them with the darkest, deepest blues -

And drowns them all in darkness.

*Cinco.*

They twist and turn their heads, peering darkened eyes out into the silk hues -

*Seis.*

*Siete.*

“*Y*-you see anything?” the green one stammers as they pick up their nail-studded, metal-plated baseball bats and long pipes, taking up awkward defensive positions.
Ocho.
The night-blindness settles over them, causing their eyes to strain out across the street but 76 sees just fine -

Nueve.

[Night Mode: ON]
Oh yes, he sees *perfectly* in the darkness.
And they make themselves such... *visible* targets.

Diez.

“Who’s there??” the green one shouts to the invisible terrors hiding in the shades of blue upon blue upon blue. The air tenses, stills, grows heavy with the weight of their fear, with the deepening hues of the abyss -

Once.

And - in what he considers to be *pretty fucking stealth* -
76 takes several quiet steps up to the edge of the alley he’s standing in.

Doce.
He watches them in quiet, dark amusement.
Watches their rigid, locked movements. Assesses their weak stances. Notes their poor footing. Critiques their terrible batting positions.

Trece.
The purple death with the rat tail is somehow moving closer to his position, awkwardly putting *his back* to the very open, very vulnerable, very *dark* perpendicular alley, turning at his torso instead of his hips and it’s just -

Catorce.

… Ah, fuck it.
76 no longer cares enough about their cruel existences to waste what precious few deeper, heartfelt emotions he still posseses that are drowning in his stardust and frozen raindrop soul - blue upon blue -

Quince.

- Upon blue -

“E-enough games, *perro!*” the purple one shouts blindly into the darkness, in what 76 assumes is meant to be an intimidating manner.

Dieciséis.

“Come out and fight!” purple, rat-tailed death snarls to the night sky -
Ten-seven.

- Upon red.

[Tactical Visor: READY]

It hums and sings a soft electronic song, a tune as familiar to him as the buzz of his old blueglass, only it burns with a little more energy, a little more vibrancy - it catches the red upon red upon red of the setting sun and wraps it around his eyes. The color never truly clouds his vision, but his sights fuzz bright like a dying solar flare at the edges, and it churns something inside him -

_Fucking try me._

*Jack burns.*

It takes another second for Purple Rattail to process the sound, but he finally _- fucking finally - _whips around to face the alley he’s been stupidly ignoring the whole time -

There’s a fraction of a second where the sheer red overwhelms everything - the purple on his face, the blue stardust darkness, the _fear_ that falls upon him like the brightest colored shadow of the dying sun -

And 76 can see him clear as day when he _fucking hurls his right fist into that tactical-red, neon-purple face._

_[No one gets out alive._

_Every day is do or die._]

The purple death slams against the opposite wall of the alleyway, as 76 is _going -_

On his right, the green mohawk winds up with his pipe, lunging at him in a wide, open, _vulnerable_ manner -

On his left, the pink mohawk is tensing up his arms, raising his metal-plated bat and -

76 ducks the pipe, swung as widely and as wildly as he predicted, feeling the rush of the air blur past him as green mohawk flails and dips but -

He’s already moving to the next one.

_[The one thing you leave behind is -]_

Liquid lightning pulses in his veins, his energy is aching and roaring, flooding through his senses like fire poured from stars, and he feels he feel he feels -

76 torques, twisting his back toward pink mohawk, but catching a glance of the baseball bat out of the red-flared edge of his sights -

He pulls his left shoulder in just a fraction of an inch more as the wind and wood and metal whistle past him, but he’s already putting his right shoulder up - his whole arm up - pushing force and pressure out from his shoulder to his elbow, feeling the heft of the heavy pulse rifle slinging back with it and -

Elbow slams into jaw with a sickening crunch of broken teeth and hairline fractures as the force of the jab sends pink mohawk flying, his reflexes slackened, his grip on the bat failing spectacularly -
Green mohawk guy is starting to recover, regaining his stance off to his left now, but -

*He is wide and open, and vulnerable.*

The bat flips on a sideways rotation once -

Green mohawk is trying to regain his footing, shifting the pipe in his hands -

His red upon red gaze never leaves the eyes - filled with fear - underlined by the glow of neon green paint -

The bat’s second rotation falls -

Directly into 76’s waiting right hand.

He’s already swinging

*Eat your heart out, Ruth,* is all he thinks -

As he smashes the steel-reinforced bat into the half skull of green mohawked death.

[How did you love? How did you love?]

There’s the cracking of metal on glo-painted skin on bone on something probably pretty integral to his existence, like the snapping of his sense of self, severed by shards of bone cutting synapses and snarling nerves. Green Mohawk slams into the wall, blood that’s red upon red upon red spitting from his mouth against dull, boring, uncolored concrete and then -

There are neon-purple arms wrapping around 76’s neck.

The grapple is the most insulting, weak, noodle-limp hug he’s ever felt.

76 snaps his left elbow back into Purple Rattail’s face, because apparently a punch to his fucking nose wasn’t enough for the dumbass. The second fucking supersoldier blow to his goddamn face knocks Purple Rattail loose, sprawling him backwards, and before he’s even hit the ground -

76 is whipping around, knocking a backhanded hit to his already semi-destroyed left cheek -

Neon purple paint flakes flicker across the darkness like frozen stardust raindrops -

For a single, almost imperceptible moment -

There’s a small galaxy of stars - as bright and colorful as the last touches of the draw of twilight, flaked with amber shards and violet paint, backlit by tactical red and electric pink, burnished by singed gold and explosive orange - in the blue upon blue darkness of the cross-streets.

[It's not what you believe.

Those prayers will make you bleed.]

Jack’s mind breaks and cracks a touch at the sight -

*there is a galaxy of black clouds and stardust and a glowing, beating sun hanging in Jack’s dull, boring hospital room at the Geneva hospital.*

The moment of mind-fracturing reality is enough to leave him wide and open and vulnerable.
A pink hand grabs his heavy pulse rifle, another pink hand grips his right wrist.

PINCHE CABRON -

76 jerks backwards slightly, instincts and old habits and reflexes kicking in as Pink Mohawk returns to tango, his face marred with a long ribbon of blood drip-drip-dripping from his nose across his lips twisting into a terrified sneer, across his chin.

76 is already moving.

Stepping backwards one-two, he snaps his right hand off the heavy pulse rifle and out through the loose part of Pink Mohawk’s grip, as his left hand slams against the barrel of the gun hard, wedging it straight into Pink Mohawk’s chest and knocking the pink right arm out of the way -

On the edge of red-fuzzed vision, he sees Orange Bandana - the one he’d thrown against the power box - struggle to rise -

And -

Out of instinct and habit and reflex and sheer fucking fear, he hates letting go of the heavy pulse rifle -

But out of pure fucking spite -

there is darkness that threatens to swallow the city of lights into the abyssal sea, darkness on the edges of his sunflared vision, darkness in between all the stars in the blue nightfall sky, darkness wrapped around a sunstar of red and gold and amber, darkness that claws at his throat and his heart

There is only darkness and spite and old habits fueling him -

Out of pure darkness and spite and old habits -

He’ll break them down with his fucking fists if that is what it takes.

[But while you’re on your knees -]

Pink Mohawk looks utterly stunned that the old soldier has let go of the rifle, shocked momentarily by the gun in his hands, but he drops it out of fear a fraction of a second later, as 76 surges forward, grabbing him by the padding of his vest -

And he fucking hurls Pink Mohawk around, up towards the drop point -

Purple Rattail - somehow still fucking standing - flinches back as Pink Mohawk screams as he rushes past his comrade, slamming into the dull, boring concrete pavement, but 76 is already turning, twisting around as Orange Paisley-Skull-Print One-Arm slings a weak, badly formed fist at him. He knocks the pathetic attack aside with his left arm, causing Orange Paisley to stumble -

Yet again, wide and open and vulnerable -

Before he fucking punches him clear across neon-orange-painted jaw.

Stay down, asshole.

“YAAAAAH -”
Cuts clear and loud and obvious across the stardust darkness, and behind the mask, 76 rolls his eyes as he whips back around, left arm once again deflecting another limp punch, this time from Purple Rattail. A look of shock and fear spreads on the purple half-skull face, already broken and smeared with red upon red upon red blood, as 76’s left fingers wrap around the purple forearm in a steel-vice grip, and his right fingers go straight to the back of his head -

*Should’ve kept your head down.*

The violet death is still screaming screaming screaming as 76 slings him around in a half-circle, dragging him by the arm and pushing pushing pushing forward by his head -

*Before breaking his skull against the dull, boring concrete wall -*

Flakes of red upon red upon neon purple splatter out across the prickled, ragged texture.

Beneath his palm, where liquid lightning pounds and surges and pulses, 76 feels the very structure of his head shift and crack and fracture.

*Ten seconds.*

*[How did you love?  How did you love?]

*How did you love?]*

But he’s already shifting his focus -

To the last one -

Absently hauling out a crate from the storage room without a fucking care in the world.

76 growls lowly, withdrawing his hands, squaring back up as the weapons drop dude finally locks eyes on his hulking form, 50 - 60 meters away.

Shades-at-Night Douchebag freezes, dropping the crate in fear, before he twists around and lets out a *high-pitched whistle.*

...*Oh shit.*

Shades-at-Night scrambles to his truck and 76 *goes.*

He dives back to the heavy pulse rifle, lying forlorn on the ground as he hears a crate crack open, and -

*What the fuck is that??*

There’s a strange, bright blue, goggle-eyed coin purse sitting on the dull, boring pavement and - 76 knows.

He’s seen it before -

“*Closing shop already?*” he’d asked her teasingly last night, hands wrapped in bandages, standing by the cracked-open doors of the bakery. Clipping the bright blue purse to her belt, Alejandra had pouted, “I need to get more sugar from the store.”

“*Guess I’ll just go brother your mom then,*” he’d chuckled, “Think she can give me advice on my
*Pokemon team?*

“No way, I’m way better at Pokemon than she is,” the girl had grinned, “She only picks the cute ones.”

“...Nothing wrong with picking just the cute ones,” 76 had feigned a pout, “My entire team is Psychic, Fairy, and Flying.” It was only partially a lie - he liked to make the most eclectic teams and make them work.

Alejandra had given him a look of abject confusion.

“...Is that really your team?” she had asked him in borderline dismay and 76 had just smirked -

The coin purse is in his pocket before he’s fully upright, and even though 76 is whipping around in time to partially square up against him -

Shades-at-Night rips out a fucking high-grade, modified Bastion Gatling gun.

All 76 thinks is:

*What in the actual fuck, Deadlock*

Before the night is *riddled* with spits and flashes of *fire*.

In an instant, he throws himself back into the original alley he’d been hiding in, ducking behind the corner of the sunshine-painted building. Before he gets a chance to react, however, there’s rifle fire pouring out from the rooftops, smattering against the squared cobbles of the building’s corner. 76 snarls to himself, *Of course. More fucking jerkwads. And on the roof too.*

Chips of stone are flying past him as the Gatling gun rips into the cobbles, rifle shots keeping him hunkered down.

He counts.

One-two -

Before flicking the switch on the auxiliary barrel.

He counts again.

Three-four -

Before diving back out against the hailstorm of bullets and terrible aim.

He rushes out low to the ground, boots gripping at the roughness of the dull, boring pavement, before he bolts forward, sparks and shards of starfire shredding the darkness of the night around him. Somehow, *none of the fucking assholes hit him*, as he rolls forward across a 10-meter span and as he lands back on his feet, he’s already leveling the gun -

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The three rockets pop and fizz out of the auxiliary barrel, spiraling and helixing their way across the rest of the street, rushing to Shades-at-Night who -

Jack revels in the briefest flash of fear that paints that smug face -
And then the truck, and the Gatling-gun-wielding-death standing on it, rip apart

As the explosion rocks the world.

Fire and smoke, sparks and burning piñatas rain down across the street, and the buildings shake off a coat of dust and darkness and pastel paints as the blast of pressure rolls across the street, and he hears skyward shouts from the men on the rooftops.

There’s a brief second where the rifle fire flinches and 76 -

He breaks into a run.

He’s already firing at the guy on the roof across from him, snapping one-two-three pulse snots straight into his head. His body jerks, the rifle fire slackens as muscles jolt and shake, but 76 bolts up a set of weapons crates, before launching himself in the air -

He flings himself around, snapping the heavy pulse rifle diagonal, up to the three figures standing on the cross-rooftops -

The red upon red upon red burns.

It flares to life.

[Tactical Visor: ACTIVATED]

His sights expand.

In the field of red upon red upon red, three blue diamond reticles light up as the Lindholm-IFF-tracking program he’d installed on the visor identifies the three gunmen wildly slinging their guns towards him to try and keep up with his movements.

Jack is already pulling the trigger.

One.

Two.

Three.

Even before he fully crash-lands into the dumpster, the first and second bodies are dropping, and the third is twisting and flailing and falling -

The soldier hoists himself off the lid of the dumpster, feet gripping onto the dull, boring concrete pavement - splattered with brightly-colored paints of death and the red upon red upon red inky liquid of life.

The blue stardust darkness is backlit by flames flicking red and gold and amber behind him.

[No one gets out alive.

Every day is do or die.]

In the street, a neon purple skeleton is struggling to crawl across the shredded, snaggled ground -

...It’s almost impressive that you still have motor functions, 76 thinks to himself as he steps blithely towards the ragged, limp figure, a figure that is already begging, pleading -
“No - no no no, no - no -”

“It would be even more impressive, the soldier thinks -

“No - no no no no, please -”

If you would actually live up to your namesake -

76 bends slightly to grab a singed, sparking piñata off the ground -

“Please - PLEASE -”

And just fucking give up -

His hands were still scabbed and cracked and broken from lighting up brightly-colored deaths with death yesterday.

[The one thing you leave behind is -]

He doesn’t want to break those scabs again.

...Although he probably already has.

(And there’s a dark, bittersweet, smoke-engulfed sunstar voice, filled with anger, filled with rage, filled with heartbreaking sorrow, whispering at him:)

“PLEASE -”

He stands over the neon-purple death, and he feels he feels he feels -

(“I was doing exactly what you and everyone else told me to do -”)

He burns -

(“I am what you made me -”)

The piñata in his hand burns -

There’s only red upon red upon red upon neon purple, smeared with the liquid of life and -

[How did you love? How did you love?]

(“- I am the ugly side of protecting peace that they never want to see, never want to know. While all the good little U.N. representatives sleep tight at night, dreaming of world peace, I went out there and made it real -”)

“These -” he growls as he smashes the piñata into the already shifted, already snapped violet skull - sparks and embers and molten sugar drip-drip-dripping with melting plastic and paper and cardboard, and he snarls, “- Aren’t -”

(“- for them -”)

Another crushing, burning blow -

“- Your -”
And a third.

“- Streets -”

A fourth.

“- Anymore!” he roars, shredding his already torn and flayed vocal chords as far as they’ll go, as the fifth, the final, the last fistful of sparks and embers, molten sugar and melting plastic breaks and cracks the violet skull across the dull, boring concrete -

(“- for the world -”)

Painting it with red upon red upon red upon brightly-colored lavender and neon violet and even softer shades of blue -

(“- for you.”)

A scream rends the blue stardust night, backlit by fire.

He looks up and -

There’s a girl there, cowering back -

*Her face is filled with fear.*

“NO - please - I -” she’s saying desperately, as she attempts to crawl backwards, away from him, away from -

*Alejandra?*

He rises in confusion, but there’s suddenly the *whirring of hover wheels* behind him and he’s flipping around as Orange-Paisley dude and some Teal-painted asshole are getting to their feet -

A hover truck reverses around the corner, backing into the cross-street, and someone is shouting hoarsely, “GET ON THE TRUCK - LET’S GO -” as another man hops off the bed of the truck to help the Teal-Asshole stand. Orange-Paisley is somehow *not broken in half* like he should be and is bolting with a clear limp and several chipped ribs to the newly-arrived vehicle -

Something inside him *snaps*

And Jack *goes off*:

“*You don’t get off that easy!*”

As he starts to run to the truck, one of the members in the bed grabs something from a crate and -

He pulls the pin, shouting, “Eat this!”

Before he hurls the small, beep-beep-beeping object and *holy fuck* -

*A GRENADE.*

Jack feels -

It bounces and clacks behind him and rolls -
Jack feels -

Right up to Alejandra’s feet, and she’s on the verge of tears and -

He gives one last look at the truck speeding away.

*It's not what you believe; those prayers will make you bleed.*

His liquid lightning pulse is pounding pounding pounding, raging as it thunders through his veins, screaming screaming screaming -

*(Give them what they deserve, Jack -)*

The fight hums and sings a burning electronic tone and there is blue upon blue upon red but -

He’s turning, his feet digging into dull, boring concrete pavement as -

*Every old instinct -*

He’s dropping the heavy pulse rifle -

*And every old reflex -*

Alejandra’s face lights up with *fear -*

*And every old habit -*

The grenade beep-beep-beeps -

*Burns inside him.*

**Jack goes.**

He runs straight at her, every muscle in his legs screaming screaming screaming at the sheer pain of pushing himself that hard, every droplet of SEP injection flooding his liquid lightning veins, every thought in his head dissolving into blue upon blue upon black smoke, there is only the beep-beep-beeping that rends the stardust night and -

Her face wide open with *fear -*

And then -

He’s there - his arms drop from his sides, his hands grab at her shoulders, he’s pulling her close, away from -

The explosion breaks the small, secret, cross-street world around them.

For a single, almost imperceptible moment -

The light engulfs the world

And drowns them in screaming heat.

Heat and pressure and the weight of light itself sears up his body, over his back, flinging him forward, sending him ripping and shredding across the dull, boring concrete, the texture snagging and clawing at him as they skid along, shrapnel and pieces of metal and concrete and brightly-painted deaths catch and tear at his jacket, his kevlar, his skin -
The explosion pushes them out of the stardust night darkness and under the dull, boring, flickering glow of a streetlamp.

And for a single, almost imperceptible moment -

Jack thinks the world had broken apart once again.

He lies there, waiting for his vision to stitch itself back together, waiting for the remnants of the world to click back into place, feeling her still, tense form against his arms and -

Slowly -

With the exhausted, aged weight of sheer existence

He rises.

Again.

[But while you’re on your knees -]

He shifts to his knees, letting her down onto the ground as gently as his scabbed, battered hands can manage, pulling away so he can see and assess. Her face, cinched with fear and the long shadows of the threat of death, relaxes, unwinds, and Alejandra blinks weakly before her eyes finally focus on him, wide and open and _shocked_.

She immediately scoots back, away from him, as he stands, and a twinge of pain sears up his left side - _torn a muscle, bruised the skin on the concrete-slide burn_ - and as his right hand moves to cradle at the aching spot just below his left ribs, his left fist is clenching and he’s sneering -

*Can’t even fucking do this right, huh.*

*Can’t even give a few punks what they deserve.*

He’s twisting back slightly, glaring out into the blue upon blue upon black smoke of the darkness, _fucking furious_ with himself -

*Of course they had backup, of course you fucked this up, of course you let half of them get away, of course you failed -*

*Old*

*Useless*

*Broken*

“...You saved me.”

*How did you love?  How did you love?*

Her voice is small, but the tone is open, vulnerable, soft with awe and confusion and he lifts his head to the sound of a voice that isn’t his or Gabriel’s and -

“...Why?”

He jerks his head back to her and, Alejandra flinches back a little in fear and -
Seven-year-old Fareeha is pouting fiercely, challenging him to yet another Pokemon match because that last one “wasn’t fair!” -

Seventeen-year-old Jesse’s grin is infectious as the self-styled cowboy smoothly flips his dumb hat back on his head -

Eighteen-year-old Angela is screaming screaming screaming with joy over her acceptance letter, bouncing around with excitement as Torbjörn laughs happily -

Thirteen-year-old Winston is humming something to himself as he solders some computer pieces together, as Athena is rattling off numbers to him -

Twenty-five-year-old Genji sits on the cliffs of Gibraltar, staring out at the setting sun, whispering, “I cannot find the gold in between my pieces -”

Eighteen-year-old Lena beams at him proudly as he snaps her picture by the Slipstream ship, showing off that trademark sunshine smile -

A little girl in layers upon layers of bright purple, giggling as she kicks at his boot playfully -

Ana is patting him on the shoulder after another successful mission, giving him a wide smile as they bring their squad home safe -

Reinhardt is laughing loud as he clinks his massive stein against Jack’s bottle and nearly spills both of their drinks -

Torbjörn is showing him pictures of his children, talking about how Brigitte is already saying she wants to join Overwatch -

There is a hand in his, rough but gentle, strong yet warm. A smile made of radiant gold, melted into human form. A mischievous smirk in the draw of the twilight. Deep, smoke-engulfed sunshine laughter. Whispers of “Estoy contigo.”

[How did you love?]

He looks at her face, hesitant and waiting and hoping -

The soldier softens under the weight of his bloodstream memories, under the blue stardust night sky, under dull, burnished glows of streetlamps, under the sheer loss of everything he had, was, loved:

“...Old habits die hard, I guess.”

Is everything he has left to himself, is all he can find in his soul to say.

He shifts a hand to his pocket as he tries - oh, he tries - to tell her, “... Run home, kid - it ain’t safe out here.” He tosses her the coin purse, fully ready to leave but -

Alejandra catches it and -

Her face lights up with brightly-colored wonder, like the dawn cresting over the eastern sea and he -

Jack stops.

He thinks he might be drowning.

He’s not worthy of that respect, that admiration, that trust.
He is old, useless, broken, ugly - scarred and torn, and scabbed and battered and broken, he is broken, there are pieces of him everywhere, and nothing seems capable of putting them back together, not lacquer, not stitches, not bandages -

Not even hope.

But still

He tries.

He fights his own emotions, he wars against his own heart, he battles with instincts and old habits and everything he has ever had and lost.

He soldiers on.

He shakes slightly under the light, and turns away from her, heading to where his heavy pulse rifle had landed, still clutching weakly at his torn side -

“You’re one of those heroes, aren’t you?”

Her voice is open and vulnerable and hopeful -

76 stops.

He has given all that he has. He has nothing left to himself.

Not even his name.

But still

He tries:

“... Not anymore.”

And he is engulfed by the blue upon blue upon black darkness, only now even the frozen raindrop stars are gone, blocked out by the remnants of the lingering smoke and dust.

He’ll try poking through some of the remaining weapons boxes, see if there’s anything worth salvaging.

…He doubts it, though.

“... And then there are the times when I see her smile and the hope in her eyes and I think:
“... Maybe I don't need to worry about Alejandra after all.’”

---------

How did you love?

How did you love?

Chapter End Notes

EYYYYYY TITLE DROOOOOPPPP

I love "Hero" so much!

The "Old Habits" section of this chapter is shot-for-shot, second-for-second as accurate as I could make it.

---

As an aside, the reason I pushed the "Strike-Commander promotion" so far back is because I was trying to reach a middle ground between Jack being commander for 20 years, and Angela's quote in the "Fading Glory" article. If I were to change something, I would probably push the promotion "up" a few years and just ignore the quote entirely. At this point though, changing the fic's timeline would involve changing Old Habits and Gifted, and I'm not about to do that. It may be something I'll look into editing much, much later, but for now, this is the version I'm sticking with.

---

Happy birthday to myself! Whooo! Put up a chapter on my birf, nice.

---

Next week: the hacker reacts to the chaos caused by the soldier. She thinks up a plan to teach him a lesson.
Chapter Summary

The hacker decides the soldier needs to learn a hard lesson.

She calls in some back-up.

Every hero needs a "villain" - who better to fight the soldier than the ghost that haunts him?

Chapter Notes

Ahhhhh, thank you all for the birthday wishes! :) Much love and much appreciation!

All your comments have been absolutely wonderful! You guys are really great and I'm so happy you're getting a kick out of the story!

This week, the hacker sets things in motion - but does she have any idea what kind of trap she's laying? She might find herself caught in it if she's not careful...

---

As an aside, the second half of this chapter may be the dumbest, funniest thing I've ever written. I also wrote it before Blizzard dropped any of the recent Talon lore, can you believe that?? I wrote this thing at the end of March, holy shit.

---

Song is "I Don't Wanna Know" by the Last Bandoleros (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Villain

Crooked little halo, this is gonna cost you

Run, run now, no one's gonna save you

Oh, there's no turning back

The devil knows where you gonna go

But I don't want to know
Shadows in the dark and the devil's on your shoulder

Gun smoke and your blood runs colder

Oh, it's all over now

Where you gonna bury your bones?

I don't want to know

---------

Semáforo: Shadows

Tuesday, July 7, 2076: 03:13 a.m. - At the destroyed Weapons Drop point in Dorado, Mexico

The six bodies on the dull, bloodied, neon-painted pavement are barely recognizable.

They are charred in smoke and ash, as the scent of singed and burnt human flesh hangs heavy in the blue and black night air. Their blood and Muertos glo-paint are splattered across the ground as easily as if someone had stepped in a puddle of rainwater and splashed it everywhere. Their weapons - if anyone could call them that - are lying uselessly around the street and the adjoining alleyway, far from their hands and Sombra -

Sombra knows -

This was the work of a professional.

Mierda, qué chingados, they hadn’t even found the remains of the seventh member slain that night because, according to Luis, he had been fucking vaporized by rockets that blew up the first truck.

Sombra walks past the bodies and stands directly in the “intersection” of the street and the small alleyway, glaring fiercely at the deaths and deeper, darker shadows around her.

It had only taken the rest of Los Muertos a few minutes to get back out to the scene after the “rescue” truck had returned with Luis, his teal skeleton paint smeared and smattered, a large blast of burned skin still smoking across his left ribs, as the shot of whatever had just narrowly missed his heart, and Tomás, his orange paint cracked and lined with blood, walking with an obvious limp as the nerves to one leg had been partially damaged, clutching a hand to several snapped ribs in his right side. It had only taken them a few minutes to decipher the jumble of words and fearful phrases pouring out of their mouths about the “glowing monster” in the darkness. It had only taken them another minute to call her, still awake in her apartment on the other side of town, and tell her what had happened.

It had only taken her another few minutes to get back out to the cross-streets by the weapons drop.

But it had taken the whole group hours to round up some proper fucking lighting.

It had been an embarrassment, verdad, de veras - Dorado was the city of lights and they were the people “to be” in the city of lights, and yet somehow, at nine at night on a fucking Monday, they had struggled to find fucking proper flood lamps and flashlights. Some of them had snapped at her to “fix the streetlamps,” she had pointed at the very obviously destroyed power box, replying that “Hacking doesn’t fucking fix that,” and one of them even had the audacity to huff, “Then what do
we even pay you for?”

A neon-green skull glare from Sombra had been enough to shut him the fuck up.

So they had then spent the rest of the last hours of the 6th and the early hours of the 7th scrounging around in their different warehouses and bases, searching for lamps and lights, plus a backup generator, until they finally had enough to work by. And then they had spent nearly an hour setting everything up and getting the archaic gas generator running before the cross-streets had been flooded with bright lights.

They are only enough to push the blue night darkness back…

But not enough to disperse it.

It lingers on the edges of their floodlights, threatening to engulf them again, and as Sombra stands on the boundaries of light and shadows, her glo-paint half-bright, half-dim, she stares furiously into the depths of the alley -

Wondering if monsters lurk there.

“…You say this is where he started?” she asks Tomás, who is watching the rest of the Los Muertos members try and gather the pieces of their dead. The bandana’d member looks up at her, nodding grimly, muttering, “Me and Pedro were just…doing guard duty, waitin’ for Diego and the rest to show up when next thing I know, Pedro is falling over and something is pullin’ me back that way -”

“And you really didn’t get a good look at him?” Sombra says, glancing down at Pedro’s faintly pink-glowing form and feeling feeling feeling -

…He will pay.

“I was tryin’ to run for my fuckin’ life, amiga,” Tomás snaps. Even though they had injected him with biotic fluid and nanobots, it was obvious that their healing measures might not be enough - the only one with any medical experience, Mariana, had already said he might have a bad leg for the rest of his life.

“I passed out, and when I woke up, they were already fighting him,” Tomás continues, repeating his story as the Los Muertos members haul body parts onto the truck. The orange-painted member looks at the dead piling up around him and mutters, “I tried to hit him, but he was way too fucking fast for me, pinche pendejo.”

“And you still didn’t see him then?” Sombra questions, heading over to the body of Daniel. His head is a mess - red blood and neon purple paint and deformed sugar and burned bits of plastic and brightly-colored paper, a half-burned out shell of a piñata, dried with blood, sitting by the mess.

…I will make him suffer.

“The only thing I really remember is this…red light,” Tomás says, and Luis, sitting beside him, adds, “Yeah…only look I got of him was this weird red…light coming off his eyes.”

…Imposible.

“…¿Qué? ¿Es eso así?” Sombra demands, flipping back to look at them. Luis shrugs as much as his wounded side will let him, saying slowly, “Es lo que yo recuerdo. Es la verdad.”

…He is supposed to be investigating LumériCo.
“...This is ten people dead in two days,” David says as he approaches her, his pink paint lighting up in the half-darkness. Their informal “squad” leader stares into the shadows of the rest of the street, his eyes taking in the scorch marks on the wall, the lingering smoke and ash in the air. He glances at her, pink to green, muttering lowly, “If this keeps up we could be looking at an all-out war here. If he continues to pick off our numbers at night, we’re fucked.”

“...So we cease operations at night, we don’t go out alone,” Sombra suggests with a quiet force, but David shakes his head, answering, “We lost seven people tonight and all of our new weapons from Deadlock. Even ignoring the human deaths, do you know how much money we spent on that? We can’t afford to stop our trades, even at night. Not with this loss.”

“We’re only going to lose more members if we continue,” she says fiercely, “Necesitas pausarlos, hombre.”

“And then what - he can kill us off by day instead?” David snaps, “There were nine people here tonight and only two of them are still alive - both severely injured, Sombra! If what they say is true, he had two people dead in a minute! Solo un minuto, Sombra!”

“Maybe if you didn’t play at being a militia, this wouldn’t happen!” Sombra hisses back, but David just gives her a bitter glare, framed by pink bones, as he retorts, “How else are we gonna start fighting back? Eh? Portero’s got half the military still in his pocket, we’re fucked if we don’t have the ability to fight back -”

“Information is power,” she whispers at him menacingly, eyes flashing pink and purple under the glow of his skeletal paint, “If you would just give me more time -”

“The last time you asked for more time, you ended up with a burned out computer and completely lost all your data,” David reminds her furiously, but Sombra just hints at him from the shadows of her soul: “Who brings in the most revenue here?”

He falls silent.

The neon-green skull and bones rattle against the neon-pink ones as Sombra states with shades of death in her heart, “You may not like my ideas, David, but look where yours have gotten you - ten people dead, no weapons to speak of, half the city furious with us, the other half terrified of us - is this what you want us to be? Hmm? Is this what we are supposed to represent? We are supposed to be fighting for the people, not against them -”

“We are -” David starts but she cuts him off with the sharp blade of her words, “No, David - brutalizing Omnics in the street, acting as the middlemen in Deadlock’s drug and arms trades, aligning ourselves with Talon, doing their dirty work in Veracruz and Tamalpais - this is not why this group was founded!”

“And you? You think you know us so well? Who is the one who suggested we get in contact with Talon in the first place?” he retorts sharply and Sombra falls quiet, murmuring, “It never hurts to have contacts, David -”

“No, amiga. That is where you are wrong. You do not simply call up the Devil and get out of the chat without selling your soul,” he growls at her, pink clashing against green, “You put us in contact with Talon, and we all knew that the moment that happened, we were part of their web. Why you continue to think that things should have been another way is the confusing part.”
Sombra is quiet.

She knows.

She knew what she was doing.

“...As if you wouldn’t sell us out the moment something better comes along,” David says to her, like a knife in her back, and Sombra shuts her eyes against the half-light, letting the darkness of her mind engulf her as his words surround her:

“I don’t know where your loyalties lie, Sombra, but I do know they are not for us.”

…Es la verdad.

She has a fondness for them, a peculiar affection for many of the members who had grown up alongside her, the second generation of Los Muertos leaders and anarchists, but they are not truly friends. She hears their whispers, she hears their frustrations with her, she hears them talk in brightly-colored shadows under the aching lights of their base, gathered around tables she is not permitted to sit in on.

She knows.

She knows they think of her as inhuman.

They had been happy to contract out her services, first as a child, then as a teen, then as a young adult, when her biosystem was merely a device she wore on her back, when her computer was merely a system of cables and monitors and drivers sitting on her desk, when her head still had hair and only hair.

But now?

Now that her biosystem is built into her back? Now that her computer hovers on the tips of her fingers at all times? Now that her head has wires and panels and implants that make her something else?

Now that she has replaced parts of her skin and bones, nerves and blood with chips and cables, artificial synapses and relays?

She knows.

She knows they look at her with the faintest traces of fear on their painted faces.

… I do not know where your loyalties lie, David, she thinks in the darkness of the cenote of her mind, But they are not for me.


But friends?

Friends they are not.

Her only friends are her biosystem, her computer, and her datapad.

And they are all she needs.

But she knows.
She knows she loves Dorado too much to leave.

The city of gilded lights, of dawns over the eastern sea, of sunsets dripping oil paint colors - this city with a beating heart of gold

is her home.

And she cannot leave it.

Especially with that tyrant trying to usher in an era of power that runs on corruption.

Especially with Los Muertos losing their ideals and turning to force.

Especially with he who is supposed to be a hero bearing neon-painted blood on his knuckles and spilling it in its streets.

Because she does have a soft fondness for the dead, even if they whisper and gossip about her sometimes.

Against the darkness of her eyelids, David’s words reach her, bright and sharp:

“We cannot afford more losses like tonight. I expect you to use your contacts to get us the help we need. *Haz que suceder.*”

She feels she feels she feels -

...*He will learn to play nice.*

“Don’t worry,” Sombra says to him, cold against the warmth of the night.

...*He will learn to be a good soldier.*

“I already have something in mind.”

---------

*The angels have gone*

*Fallen away*

*Left you long ago.*

*When your time has come*

*It's all said and done*

*Where you gonna go?*

*I don't want to know*

*Someone's crying out but there ain't no savior*

*One way road, gonna meet your maker*
Oh, lights are burning out
Who's gonna take your soul?
I don't wanna know

--------
From: [Los.Muertos]
To: [Puebla.Base]

Subject: Pidiendo para asistencia

Anoche un vigilante nos atacó - mató a siete personas y sabotéó nuestra acuerdo con Deadlock. Creemos que él atacó y mató a tres otras personas anteanoche también. Creemos también que él tiene entrenamiento militar y él es armado. David está preocupado que esto es lo que va a ocurrir otra vez, así que estamos pidiendo para asistencia.

Me enteré que ustedes tienen un mercenario llamado “Reaper” y él tiene habilidades en esto tipo de situación. Nos pondrás en comunicación con él?

Gracias.

---

(From Sombra to the Puebla Base:)

Last night, a vigilante attacked us - he killed seven people and sabotaged our deal with Deadlock. We believe that he attacked and killed three other people the night before as well. We also believe that he has military training and is armed. David is worried that this is going to occur again, and so we are asking for assistance.

I have learned that you have a mercenary called "Reaper," and that he has skills in this type of situation. Will you put us in communication with him?

Thanks.

---

From: [Puebla.Base]
To: [Los.Muertos]
Si tal vigilante es un riesgo, entonces estaremos felices ayudar. Pero “Reaper” no está trabajando en México. Pasaré tu mensaje a la base de Zaragoza y dejaré el gerente de Zaragoza saber sobre tu situación.

---

(From the Puebla Base to Sombra:)

If such a vigilante is a risk, then we will be happy to assist. But Reaper is not working in Mexico. I will pass on your message to the Zaragoza base and let the manager of Zaragoza know about your situation.

--------

The angels have gone

Fallen away

Left you long ago.

When your time has come

It's all said and done

Where you gonna go?

I don't want to know

--------

Segador: Executioner

Tuesday, July 7, 2076: 04:47 p.m. - Talon Zaragoza Base, Spain

He gives the room a once over and decides he already doesn’t like it.

There’s a big, three-quarters desk in the center, a fairly nice computer set up in one corner, lots of papers stacked neatly in another. Holoprojectors frame it, displaying a bunch of information - even backwards Reaper can see an Atlas News stream, several email messages, some sort of news article, the works. Gerente sits in the middle, fingers tapping away at a real, physical keyboard, but every so often they lift one hand and swipe at things on the holoprojectors, moving windows around or
closing tabs. To Reaper’s left, there are giant bay windows showing some of the low level mountains and foothills the base is nestled in, short trees and scrub brush melding seamlessly with the sky, tinted a faint pink-purple on the eastern edge. Sunsets here take forever in the summer, slow and long and drawn out into multitudes of twilight.

Close to him, by the door, are a series of large armchairs around a low coffee table type thing, with a massive tv monitor set into the wall, and there are a couple of chairs on the opposite side of the desk. Otherwise the room is sparsely decorated - more holoprojectors hang about the walls with calendars and a bunch of sheets with information and schedules on them. Everything is clean, everything is neat, everything is organized.

Everything is almost an exact fucking copy of Jack’s official Strike-Commander office in Geneva.

Well -

Minus the small touches: a couple mugs and a pair of combat gloves left on the coffee table, posters and pictures of different places, music or Athena’s voice in the background of everything, a workbench with the heavy pulse rifle disassembled on it -

One of his spare grey hoodies hanging over the back of Jack’s chair -

Jack lifting his head from whatever had his attention on the holoprojectors to give him a wide smile -

You need to fucking stop, Reaper snarls to the stained glass shadows of aching memories in his mind, and the image breaks and cracks and falls to pieces on the cold, concrete floor. He turns his attention back to Gerente, who looks up at him and then flicks away several holo-windows.

We have work to do.

“...You couldn’t just message me about whatever this is?” Reaper snaps before trudging over to one of the chairs. Gerente closes the main holoprojector between them, and then squares up towards Reaper’s massive frame. Reaper, meanwhile, grabs one of the chairs, twists it to the side, plops himself into it with a flutter of his overcoat, and then slings his weighted combat-boots up onto the second chair, folding his arms across his chest.

“...Please, make yourself comfortable,” Gerente states dryly and Reaper just grunts, “Already did.”

“Puedo ver eso, joder (tn: I can see that, fuck),” Gerente sighs and Reaper tilts his head towards them in surprise, muttering wryly, “I didn’t know you could swear. I’d report you to HR but you are HR.”

“Ahaha, funny,” Gerente says without a drop of mirth in their voice, before they add with a touch of exhaustion, “Can I just explain why I brought you here and then you can go back to... whatever it is you do around here.”

“Drink mainly,” Reaper informs them unhelpfully, and Gerente makes an unimpressed expression, causing Reaper to lift a clawed finger and continue, “Get berated by Widowmaker. Berate that bastard Inigo or Henri as an outlet. Drink some more. Go out to the training grounds and berate your agents out there. I do a lot around here, okay? I think I deserve a raise.”

“... You are already very expensive,” is all Gerente can manage to say, and Reaper just chuckles, “Worth every penny. You should see the drills I got people doing. I deserve a promotion at least.”

“You are a contract mercenary.”
“So… you’re saying I can be promoted to head contract mercenary?” Reaper offers, gesturing with a wave of his hand, “Numero Uno mercenary? King of the hill mercenary? Top dog mercenary? Can I change my name to Dog the Bounty Hunter?”

“I was following along until that point,” Gerente admits and Reaper takes this as a small but important personal victory, snapping, “Great, let’s redo all my paperwork to say ‘Dog’ instead.”

“I take it back. No. The answer is absolutely no,” Gerente groans, sinking their head into their hands and Reaper grumbles, “Worth a fucking shot, I suppose.”

“Por favor, señor segador, tengo trabajo hacer hoy (tn: please, mister Reaper, I have work to do today),” Gerente says with a slight whine to their voice and Reaper chuckles sarcastically, “It’s almost five - you ain’t done yet? For shame.”

“No me gano suficiente renta para esto (tn: I don’t make enough for this),” they grumble and the mercenary laughs lowly, “Join the fucking team, coach.”

They lapse into still silence, Gerente with their head still sunk in their hands and Reaper just kinda… hanging out, watching the sun set real fuckin’ slow on the left side of the bay windows, before he finally asks, “…Wait, why the fuck am I here?”

“I ask myself that every day,” Gerente whispers into their hands before they sigh and straighten back up, saying in a more authoritative tone, “You have been requested to work a solo assistance mission in Dorado, Mexico.”

Behind the mask, Reaper scowls at the last two words, clicking an index claw on an arm guard.

“… So no squad support, huh?” he says lowly, contemplatively, “What is Widowmaker doing in this time?”

“She has her assignments for later this month, but for now, her handler wants to focus on her training,” Gerente states calmly, as if it is a routine subject.

Reaper fucking glares at that response.

…Her handler?

…Gotta keep up with that fucking brainwashing, huh?

“…Alright, so am I being relocated to Mexico or what?” Reaper asks, words dripping with both sarcasm and venom, “Is it because I’m a bad roommate? Listen, I clean all my dishes and I don’t leave a mess in the bathroom. You tell that bastard Henri that if he has something to say then he should say this shit to my face instead of going straight to HR -”

“Please, Reaper, just… let me do my job,” Gerente outright pleads and that gets him to shut up. The manager of the base just sighs and then pulls a holo-tab over in between them, explaining, “I have received a message from our Puebla base in Mexico. One of our affiliate groups is requesting your help in tracking a rogue vigilante.”

Reaper’s glare only deepens.

…Could be that motherfucker… but how did he get to Dorado? What would he even do there?

- there had been a huge picture of Dorado’s seaside cliffs and buildings, strands of gold lights threading the night beneath the stars in an office just like this one -
Alright, seriously, you need to chill the fuck out, Reaper snaps to the pieces of the shattered memory on the concrete of his mind, before refocusing on the conversation at hand.

“I passed the message on to our director here, and the request has been approved,” Gerente explains, “According to our contact, Los Muertos lost ten members in two days, with seven deaths just last night.”

... Well holy fuck.

“And just one person did this?” Reaper asks skeptically, which gets Gerente to shrug, as they say, “That is what the message says. They believe this individual has military training and is armed.”

Well, that means fuckall these days. Everyone and their grandmother received military training during the Crisis.

And guns are as cheap as ever.

- the heavy pulse rifle sits disassembled on a workbench in a corner of the room, as Jack bends over it, inspecting different pieces -

- the heavy pulse rifle is being wedged against his body as the soldier beneath him fights to sit up under the Southwestern sun -

I’m not giving up, motherfucker, Reaper growls as he crushes the broken memory fragments under a weighted combat boot, grinding it into the concrete, I can play this game for all fucking time, if you want.

“Los Muertos…” Reaper mutters, pulling up a mental file of the information he remembers on them, “I thought they were just a small time anarchy gang on the coast of Mexico. They’re associated with Talon now?”

“Well, with a name like that, of course they would be,” Gerente jokes back sarcastically and Reaper just snorts, ‘Hey now - not all dead things are fuckin’ Neutral Evil, you know.’

Because he would know.

…Not that he’s been doing a very good job of proving otherwise.

But still.

Effort. Or something.

“...Is that how you see Talon?” Gerente asks observantly and Reaper just sighs, “Oye, amigo - no insulte a los muertos. Ellos merecen respeto. Y una promoción (tn: Listen, friend – do not insult the dead. They deserve respect. And a promotion).”

But Gerente just gives him a strange, quizzical looking, asking slowly, “... ¿Usted es puertoriqueño (tn: You are Puerto Rican)??”

“... ¿No? Mi familia es de México... Bien, soy californiano (tn: no? My family is from Mexico... Well, I am Californian),” Reaper clarifies, before asking, “... ¿Por qué puertoriqueño (tn: why Puerto Rican)??”

“Yo creí que... Well, it is nothing. I was mistaken,” Gerente says, before adding, “You would respect the dead like that.”
“...You know they’re just kids in glo-paint, right?” Reaper states with a low rumbling chuckle to his words, “They’re not actually dead. Although they’re better than Deadlock just on aesthetic alone.”

“I… I know they’re not actually dead,” Gerente stutters but the merc just shrugs, saying casually, “Hard to tell with you sometimes, bud.” That gets Gerente to rub at their temple in frustration, before they grumble, “Talon has been in contact with them for a few years now. They were and still are an established trade partner with Deadlock -”

Beneath the mask, Reaper makes a disgusted face at the mere name of the American gang.

“- But in the last few years, their reputation has grown tremendously. They are a force to be reckoned with these days,” Gerente informs him, “Which is why - if it is in fact a single vigilante - this could seriously jeopardize our efforts in Mexico.”

... Which are what exactly?

But Reaper knows.

He knows to mind his fucking manners.

And he also knows not to ask too many fucking questions like, the second week on the job.

“Alright, well, I’m not sure where I got this fuckin’ reputation about manhunting - not that it’s the worst thing to have a reputation for, if you get what I mean,” Reaper adds and Gerente makes another deadpan expression, which only encourages the merc to continue, “But a paid vacation to the Gulf of Mexico? Plus I get to kill people? Sounds pretty fuckin’ bangin’.”

“... This is not a vacation,” Gerente reminds him, but Reaper shrugs, “That all depends on your frame of reference. If I get to kill a dude and have some beer on the beach, that’s a fuckin’ vacation.”

Gerente just sinks their head in their hands again. Reaper turns his attention back to the still slow-moving sunset until the manager sighs exasperatedly, “I need to explain more to you.”

“...Of course you do.”

“Are you going to let me explain the protocols, or are you going to be cheeky the whole time?” Gerente asks bluntly, and Reaper just chuckles, “Oooh, ‘cheeky,’ I take it you learned the Queen’s English in school?”

“...We should never have hired you.”

“Too late - you know what they say about feeding strays,” Reaper mutters, but he sighs, “Fine, fucking tell me about how this shit works. Do you need my mom to sign my permission slip for the field trip?”

“No. There are no forms to fill out. Everything is automated,” Gerente states, lifting their head again, “As a contracted mercenary you will be provided with two things: base support and transportation between bases. For this mission, we will be providing you with a ride on one of our transport ships across the Atlantic to the Puebla base. There you will check in and confirm that you have arrived.”

“...Are you a terrorist organization or a fucking airline company?” Reaper growls and Gerente just quirks an eyebrow at him before retorting, “Most airline companies are a terror to work with anyways.”
Well.

Just when you think you know someone.

“...Impressive,” Reaper compliments them, “Looks like you can play along.”

“Some of us just want to do our jobs,” Gerente informs him sarcastically, “Not all of us have time to stand around drinking and yelling all day.”

“Listen man, my heart is already dead - you can’t slay me like that,” Reaper drawls, lolling his head a little, “That’s just overkill.”

“...A veces te odio (tn: sometimes I hate you),” Gerente says as their lip curls slightly and Reaper just smirks behind the mask, “Thanks, been wanting to use that one for awhile now. It was really killing me inside.”

“...I am a good person,” Gerente states to the air between them, “I do not deserve these things.”

“You manage a fucking terrorist base - you’re not a good person,” Reaper reminds them, slouching further into his seat. Gerente watching him for a moment before stating coldly, “Once you are at the Puebla base, the manager there will provide you with whatever assistance or munitions you require. You are...a rather special case, so I suppose you won’t want for much, but lodging will be provided for you, should you need it.”

“...This is the worst summer camp I’ve ever heard of,” Reaper cracks as dryly as the Sahara and Gerente just plows onwards, “For as long as you are on this mission, Puebla will be your Talon base of operations. You will not be able to contact me or anyone else in this base or any other.”

This gets Reaper to pause, and then he asks slowly, “...I don’t get a say in this matter, huh?”

“No. This is how contracted mercenary work operates for Talon,” Gerente explains, “It is very rare that missions for contracted mercenaries are not approved, and even rarer that the mercenary gets any opportunity to reject a mission. Working for Talon as a contracted assassin, hunter, or tracker means you have very little say in which missions are chosen for you, or where you are requested to work.”

So kiss any personal morals goodbye, huh? Reaper reads between the lines, but he glances at his stardust memories on the dull, boring concrete floor, thinking bitterly:

Good thing I killed those years ago.

“The benefit of choosing contracted work over... fuller loyalties to Talon is that you are given a wide range of freedom in how you choose to operate on your solo mission,” Gerente continues blithely, “From Puebla, it is up to you to manage your transportation options, your arrival in Dorado, and your contact with Los Muertos.”

...Qué?

“Wait, y’all don’t oversee any of that?” Reaper half-asks, half-snaps in surprise, which gets Gerente to smirk faintly, “No. We understand that many of our contracted mercenaries and trackers have their own preferences on how they operate and how they develop their tactics. We leave this freedom up to them so that they can work unhindered and unrestricted.”

“...The hell kinda organization is this?” Reaper demands, because -

Because it sounds a helluva lot like -
“We are modeled after a number of covert operations organizations, but we attempt to retain the flexibility of a looser structure,” Gerente explains, “There are many times when solo agents - Talon or contract - must operate without contact to their mission base for weeks or months at a time. We wish to give them that freedom of movement in the event that something goes wrong.”

Beneath the mask, Reaper fucking glares furiously.

He attempts to reign his anger in, attempts to keep it from cracking out from under his skin, attempts to steel his emotions against the rage that boils in his soul -

…First you take my fucking Watchpoint blueprints, and then you take my fucking Blackwatch structure.

…What else have you taken from me?

The glitter and shimmer of broken stardust memories - crushed underfoot - mocks him from its place on the concrete pavement of his mind.

…Did you take them too?

- they had been in an office just like this, only brighter, more colorful, lined with pictures and posters of his favorite places, their favorite places - Dorado, Ilios, Cairo, Mexico City, Grand Mesa, Paris, Juno, Rio de Janeiro, Jakarta, Mt. Fuji, the Great Wall -

- Los Angeles, Boise National Forest, New York City -

- they had been in an office just like this, only brighter, more colorful, better, when they had started losing each other -

- hurling truths that cut like obsidian knives and jade fangs -

- Jack’s furious, raging, hurt face rises, blue eyes - eyes that should only ever have been blue - filled with the ashes to ashes and dust to dust of all they had loved crumbling into the sea -

Reaper points a shotgun

And shatters the stained glass memory.

…I told you, he thinks as the pieces ring out across the dull, boring concrete pavement like the chiming of bells:

I can do this for the rest of my life, motherfucker.

I will break everything you throw at me.

I will destroy every attempt you make.

I will kill all that you try to do.

Fucking try me, asshole.

I have nothing left but time, so just fucking try.

“It is up to you to decide how you wish to operate in regards to Los Muertos,” Gerente says in reality, and Reaper looks up from the sunset-stained pieces of glass on the barren, ash-covered floor of his mind to assess the manger, who continues on as if the wreck of a man across from him isn’t
having a mind-bending meltdown. Gerente states, “But bear in mind that any losses or grievances lobbed against you by our affiliates comes with a price.”

“Great - so no customer complaints. Got it,” Reaper snarls, more viciously than he intended to, but there’s brightly-colored glass dust choking his lungs and he hates it, so he adds with even more viciousness, “Do I need to smile and tell them to have a ‘Talon-rrific’ day too?”

“I am not saying you cannot be your… unique self -” Gerente begins and Reaper growls lowly, “Tread carefully, asshole -”

“Just that we assess the qualities of successes and failures as much as we assess the final mission status itself,” Gerente informs him, but adds with a quieter, more ominous tone, “Every mission comes with a cost - the question is how much of that was going to occur and how much of that was… negligence.”

“...So don’t let them all die,” Reaper says bluntly and Gerente gives him a wicked grin, “…That is closer to my point, yes. But if the mission - this vigilante - does happen to be that big of a threat and they do all die… well, that is not your responsibility.”

“...Such a considerate, caring corporation I work for,” Reaper grumbles, wondering if Los Muertos is aware that Talon will have no issues razing the city of lights if the gang fails. Gerente continues that wicked grin, saying coldly, “We try to support our employees in all their endeavors.”

“I would say you’re the best manager I’ve ever had, but that’s not true in the slightest,” the merc mutters, and Gerente grimaces, saying dryly, “I am not sure if I am insulted by that, or surprised that the CIA still has good managers.”

Oh.

His “cover story.”

“...Yeah, well, you know, they have good dental there. Happy teeth means happier employees,” Reaper says easily, as if he is not struggling to keep his shit together in an office room that like a lesser version of the one he’d lost everything in -

As if he is not sitting in the exact position where he had stood

When he had materialized a knife made of obsidian smoke

“Gabriel, don’t.”

And cut away the skin of his own palm
Shouting at him, the one with the blue of seasunken night sky in his eyes

“LOOK AT IT, JACK - FUCKING LOOK AT IT.”

How those eyes had widened in horror over the black mesh of shadows that had enveloped his hand, sinewing the skin back to his bones -

“Look at what I have become.”

Before his world and everything in it had been ripped apart by the light.

...Did you take him from me too?

...Did you take all that I had from me?
Or did I destroy it myself?

Like I do to everything?

He’s never been good at fixing things - Jack was always better at fixing things - he’s only ever been good at destroying things, he’s only ever been good at fighting things, he’s only ever been good at playing at war -

[This ain’t no cross to carry.]

He’s only ever been judge, jury, and executioner.

[We are the judge and jury, we are the judge and jury.]

It’s how he was made. It’s what he was made into.

It’s all he’s ever been:

The fire and the fury, sublimated into deaths and wars, sublimated into two shotguns.

He knows.

The one with sunshine in his hair, with the sea in his eyes, with dreams in his heart, with strength in his soul, had once told him that everything he touched turned to gold

But he knows.

The only things he’s ever touched are shotguns

And his hands strangling a heart he’d wanted to see grow.

Gerente is watching him closely, so Reaper rolls his head on his shoulders and says bluntly, “So anyways.”

“...I will be giving you the information of our associate within Los Muertos,” Gerente says after a beat, “She is not strictly a long-term contracted mercenary like yourself, but hired on more of a job to job basis. I believe the Puebla base has attempted to offer her a long-term position, but she claims she ‘has work to do’ in Dorado first.”

“...And what exactly does she do?” Reaper asks, wondering if this damn sun will ever fucking set, and if the brightly-colored figure made of sunkissed, seabreeze stained glass will ever truly shatter in his mind.

“Sombra is a black market hacker, probably the best at that,” Gerente explains to him, and Reaper scowls at the sunset, assessing the obvious codename, but the manager continues, “She has been affiliated with Los Muertos for the entirety of her career, but she sells her skills to almost anyone if they can afford to pay.”

“...So Chaotic Neutral. Got it,” Reaper states and Gerente snorts, “…Chaotic self-interest, rather. In any case, no one has managed to find the right price to purchase her loyalties or skills for the long-term, but she is an… interesting character.”

“...I do not appreciate the way you said that,” Reaper grumbles, glancing at them, “You just made my fucking paid vacation to Mexico sound like a real fuckin’ chore.”

“I would say that you will get along well with her, but I cannot actually say that in good faith,”
Gerente says bluntly and Reaper just asks, “...Thanks for the vote of confidence?”

“You’re welcome,” Gerente wisecracks and Reaper grins, “You ain’t half-bad. I’m bumping you up on my list of favorite managers.”

“An honor, I’m sure,” Gerente tells him, but adds, “You have just missed the last transport ship to Puebla, by the way.”

Neato.

“We receive a return ship at about... two in the morning,” Gerente says, looking at a timetable on their holoprojectors, “But the pilot gets to sleep, so they do not run the next trip until ten in the morning.”

“So I get to lose a whole day sitting in the ship for five hours, and then I get to figure out how to get to Dorado,” Reaper grumbles, “Which is what - another three or four hours?”

“Al parecer,” Gerente says casually, pulling up a map, “The trains will make that easier, though.”

Public transportation.

With his fucking face.

“...Maybe I’ll just walk,” Reaper grunts and Gerente says cheerfully, “Well, you’re out of my hands, so I really do not care what you do.”

“...I take back what I said about you moving up the favorite manager list,” Reaper mutters as Gerente taps several things onto their keyboard. A second later, the datapad in his pocket beeps and Reaper unfolds his arms to pull it out:

[[Zaragoza.Base] sent a new contact: [Sombra]]

“...I’m not really a people person,” Reaper says dryly and Gerente chuckles, “¿Verdad? No me había dado cuenta (tn: Truly? I could not tell).”

“Funny. Do I just fucking message her or some shit?” the merc growls and Gerente shrugs, “That is usually what people do, yes. Now, are you going to leave so I can work? Or do I have to entertain you all night?”

“No, Imma go bother Widowmaker now,” Reaper says, rolling his shoulders and rising from his seat. He heads back to the door but pauses -

The sun is still taking its sweetass time trying to set in the left edge of the bay windows.

There are still shards of glass memories, bright and colorful, on the floor of his mind.

This room is a pale imitation of another.

He hates it.

But still

Reaper knows to mind his fucking manners, so he growls out:

“Thanks for telling me this shit.”
And then he strides out the door.

--------

The angels have gone
Fallen away
Left you long ago.
When your time has come
It's all said and done
Where you gonna go?
I don't want to know

Creep in the night, hide in the daylight
Run for your life, in the end it's a dog fight
Oh, someone's after you
Where you gonna rest your soul?
I don't want to know

Where you gonna bury them bones?
I don't want to know
Devil knows where you gonna go
But I don't want to know

--------

[The.Reaper]: So I guess I’m supposed to start this shit or something

[...]

[Sombra]: what an introduction

[The.Reaper]: oye, muchacha

[The.Reaper]: I’m not good at this communication shit

[The.Reaper]: I’m good at one thing
[Sombra]: let me guess
[Sombra]: killing people?
[The.Reaper]: no
[The.Reaper]: sewing
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: qué
[The.Reaper]: what’s the best way to get from Puebla to Dorado
[Sombra]: you can’t just
[Sombra]: drop that kinda bomb on me
[Sombra]: and walk away
[The.Reaper]: is it the train or
[The.Reaper]: should I just fucking rent a car
[Sombra]: is this actually happening
[The.Reaper]: listen
[The.Reaper]: I don’t wanna do this either
[The.Reaper]: but I basically got told that I don’t have a fucking choice
[The.Reaper]: so the one choice I do have
[The.Reaper]: is train or car
[Sombra]: did you pick that username too?
[The.Reaper]: look
[The.Reaper]: I don’t know how the fuck you got around the two-name restriction
[The.Reaper]: but some of us aren’t that fuckin advanced okay
[Sombra]: que chingados
[The.Reaper]: don’t you fuckin swear at me
[Sombra]: no puedo creer esto
[The.Reaper]: yo but
[The.Reaper]: fucking same tho
[Sombra]: …
[The.Reaper]: ...so train?
[The.Reaper]: I don’t like cars but trains are… not ideal

[Sombra]: it

[Sombra]: it’s your money?

[The.Reaper]: …

[The.Reaper]: renting a car means I gotta fucking drive

[Sombra]: yes

[Sombra]: that is how cars work

[The.Reaper]: …

[Sombra]: have you driven in mexico before?

[The.Reaper]: oye

[The.Reaper]: I learned to drive in LA

[The.Reaper]: that’s like jumping straight to Rainbow Road in reverse 200cc in Mario Kart

[Sombra]: fucking WHAT

[The.Reaper]: have I driven in mexico before

[The.Reaper]: jfc

[The.Reaper]: I aint even met you yet and I already feel insulted

[The.Reaper]: guess I’ll just fuckin hash it out on the train then

[The.Reaper]: maybe I should pay for first class

[Sombra]: do what makes you happy?

[The.Reaper]: oh well that’s easy

[The.Reaper]: nothing makes me happy

[Sombra]: no mames, pendejo

[The.Reaper]: seriously who the fuck told you it was okay to swear at the assassin coming to your town

[Sombra]: …

[The.Reaper]: oh wait no

[The.Reaper]: a good beer on the beach makes me happy

[Sombra]: ..I’ll get you a six pack?

[The.Reaper]: oh no shit, really?
[Sombra]: what do you like?

[The.Reaper]: something dark would be good

[The.Reaper]: they only serve pisswater and the blood of grapes over here in Spain

[The.Reaper]: tequila and whiskey are good choices too

[Sombra]: I will keep that in mind?

[The.Reaper]: cool, good shit

[Sombra]: this is unreal

[The.Reaper]: did that dude really kill seven people by himself?

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: yes

[The.Reaper]: damn

[The.Reaper]: that’s boss af

[Sombra]: …

[The.Reaper]: oh wait

[The.Reaper]: I mean, that’s fucked up af

[Sombra]: …

[The.Reaper]: oh wait hang on

[The.Reaper]: that’s KILLER af

[Sombra]: por favor, no

[The.Reaper]: okay lo siento

[Sombra]: I’m not mad, I’m just

[…]

[Sombra]: there are literally no words in two languages that express how I’m feeling right now

[The.Reaper]: fucking

[The.Reaper]: same

[Sombra]: …

[The.Reaper]: anyways

[The.Reaper]: I’ll let you know when the ETA is when I reach Puebla

[Sombra]: sounds like a plan
[The.Reaper]: good shit

Chapter End Notes

It only took us 23 chapters but we finally get Gabriel "Legendary Memer" Reyes to engage in a chat.

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You guys don't know how happy the implications that Talon is a "massive evil business organization" that Blizzard dropped with the Doomfist lore made me. Seriously, I was over the goddamn moon.

We're heading towards the climax soon!

---

Next week: we find out what the soldier has been up to in Dorado.
Chapter Summary

[Crepúsculo]: In the twilight chapters of the story, shadows draw the reaper and soldier together.

[Enfrentarse]: To confront each other, to fight each other.

Chapter Notes

"It's always darkest before the dawn" isn't true at all, is it?

It's always darkest before midnight.

---

Song is "Pale White Horse" by The Oh Hellos (Youtube)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overwatch: Crepúsculo - Enfrentarse

Down they fell like the children of Eden
Down they fell like the tower
As the land relinquished her ghost

Heed the sirens, take shelter, my lover
Flee the fire that devours
But the sight held me fixed
Like a bayonet against my throat

Semáforo: Héroe

Wednesday, July 8, 2076: 01:07 p.m. - the train station on the edge of Dorado, Mexico

She honestly has no idea what to expect.

When he had messaged her out of the blue yesterday, her emotions had run the full gamut - shock, admiration, respect, more shock, increasingly confused shock, shock dipping into pure deathly horror, and then finally just speechlessness.
Because Sombra had a lot of expectations, hopes, and dreams about meeting Gabriel Reyes… or whatever is left of him, but that -

That was not one of them.

So here she is, standing around in Dorado’s central train station, surrounded by regular people and bright colors and beautiful strands of light, waiting for all that remains of her idol, feeling half-dead inside from the cocktail of anxiety, nervousness, shock, and sheer confusion welling up inside her, waiting for the slightly-delayed one-p.m. afternoon arrival from Puebla. She paces slightly, only half-reading news articles on her datapad, constantly adjusting the sports jacket around her waist, listening to her running shoes squeak on the polished tile of the open-air station. People used to Dorado give her a passing glance, recognize her attire as an obvious Los Muertos member. A flicker of fear passes over their faces, they avert their eyes, and go about their day.

Sombra blends right in with the brightly-colored shadows of Dorado.

But she knows.

She knows she also sticks out like a brightly-colored weed, poking through the cobbled pavement of the streets of Dorado.

Sombra nervously bites on the end of her left thumb, scanning a forum post speculating if Soldier: 76 is, in fact, Jack Morrison, or if the idea is just another dumb conspiracy theory by paranoid fuckers on the Internet (the comments start off with insightful posts and ideas and some jokes and rapidly dissolve to people slinging insults at each other), when a message blips at the top of her datapad:

[The.Reaper]: disembarking

---

Swallowing her nervousness, Sombra flicks over to the messaging app and taps out:

[Sombra]: I am in the central room
[Sombra]: ...what should I look for?
[The.Reaper]: oh trust me
[The.Reaper]: you’ll recognize me

---

…Is he actually wearing that absurd combat outfit from Deadlock Gorge?? Sombra wonders wildly, lifting her eyes to scan the crowd coming in from the arrival platform. It’s the usual group so far - business workers coming to meet with the local government, LumériCo employees returning from wherever, lots of summer tourists coming to stay at the Mission or run around the beach, locals returning from whatever special appointments they had outside the city, and Sombra is beginning to suspect he’s messing with her when -

Her jaw slackens slightly.

A figure, nearly two meters tall, emerges among the crowd. The people seem to part around him,
whispering and pointing, as he strides forward. His outfit is decked out in black and threaded with
decorated silver - the patterns are intricate and beautiful, making swirling patterns on the ends of the
sleeves and silver-lined skulls on his shoulders. His red vest is bright and bold on his chest, engulfed
by smoky grey-black layers that move dramatically with each step.

But the shocking part -

The **fucking stunning part** -

Is the silver-and-gold-trimmed skull mask, slick and yet swirled with a studded, lace design -
And the fucking massive black-and-silver sombrero on his head.

Sombra *recoils in horror.*

**WHAT THE FUCK KIND OF STEALTH ASSASSIN IS HE.**

She had enough self-awareness to know that wearing brightly-colored glo-paint when engaging in
highly illegal activities, especially at night, is NOT standard protocol or even common sense.

But this was next level.

The crowd watches him go, many children giggling as adults tilt their heads in slight confusion *but then* -

After a beat -

People just continue on their way.

Sombra slowly begins to breathe again.

After recovering a little, she darts over to him, as he looks around absently, folding his arms across
his chest and -

“*What the FUCK are you wearing?*” she snaps at him from by his right elbow, and he jolts slightly,
before calming down and hissing back, “I could say the same to you.”

“I am a Los Muertos member -”

“And I’m just some lone mariachi member looking to make some extra cash off the tourists here,”
Reaper growls back, pointing a finger at her, “You don’t know how many people asked me to play
shit on the train. I did make like a solid three-hundred pesos, though. That’s a decent meal right
there.”

“You - you actually played music?!” Sombra gawks and Reaper pauses, seemingly assessing her
behind the mask before -

He unfolds his arms, slipping his hands to something on his back and -

He slings a pale, white guitar into his hands, adjusting the neck in his left gloved hand and the body
in his right, strumming out a few quick chords on the strings as practice.

Sombra’s jaw drops again.

And then -
He just starts playing.

She doesn’t know what song he’s playing off the top of her head, but it’s good, it’s smooth - even with gloves on (?!), his fingers move fast and fluid, as the guitar sings into central station. Now, more people stop and look, some nod approvingly, and a group of tourists, babbling excitedly in English, approach, clapping and smiling. He finishes a few short strums and the tourists applaud wildly. They hold out a few dollars and Reaper extends his left hand, saying in a low and forcibly cheerful voice, “Gracias.”

The tourists wander off and Reaper slings the guitar on his back, stuffing the money into a pocket as he growls, “Pinche pendejos. The Americans really like it when you play something they recognize, even though it isn’t mariachi at all. They eat that Hotel California shit up. At least it’s a good song.”

Sombra continues to just gawk at him, before he snaps at her, “So what’s the fucking plan?”

“Are you gonna wear that the whole time?” she asks because she is on the verge of tears over the idea of Reaper trying to track down 76 in a mariachi charro uniform. Reaper rolls his head in exasperation, grumbling, “Jesus Christ, of course not, what kinda asshole do you take me for? I still need to walk around and sit on trains, amiga. This cover is surprisingly effective. It also gets me free money for playing The Eagles. Now, let’s get the lead out and start planning this shit. How many people are in on this?”

He starts walking off towards the exit that leads to the city proper and after a beat, Sombra runs to join him, saying, “Well, we have twenty more members here in the city -”

“The jackass took out a fucking third of your gang by himself?” Reaper asks in utter shock and Sombra scowls at the skull mask, muttering, “You’re actually really impressed by this, huh?”

“Listen, you can’t expect sympathy from the devil, but you can expect him to be impressed by that kinda dedication,” Reaper says with a low rumble of awe in his voice, “Artists always appreciate other artists of their kind.”

_Dios mio_, Sombra thinks to herself, you fucking would. You fucking would praise Jack Morrison for killing ten people.

She is beginning to think she has made a costly mistake by trying to outmaneuver the soldier.

They exit the train station and -

Reaper just dead stops in the middle of the platform.

“... I thought you wanted us to ‘get the lead out -’” she starts to tease him, but stops because -

His focus is very clearly on the sea.

_Do you think of me_  
_When you look to the sea?_

Reaper’s head shifts ever so slightly, glancing to the right, and then to the left, scanning the city of rainbow sugar cubes and candy drops, rivers of trees flooding in between the buildings, streams of gold lights glittering from every rooftop, threading through every street - all of them tumbling down steep, verdant hills to the edge of the sea, wide and blue upon blue upon blue. Sombra grows slightly somber as -
the man looms up, large and intimidating, but he’s got a wide, happy grin, framed by a crisp beard and long scars on his rich, deep face, and he spreads his arms wide and menacing as the other man behind her laughs, “¡Huir! ¡Rápido!” -

but the girl is not afraid of either of them -

She stands beside him, looking out over the city of lights before saying softly, as soft as the silk skies above, “Hermosa, ¿no? ...Nuestra ciudad de luces es la más hermosa.”

“...Well, you’re not wrong,” Reaper hums to himself, before his gaze appears to rest on -

“...That pyramid is an eyesore,” he mutters tartly, and Sombra looks at the LumériCo building, glowing weakly against the brighter radiance of the sun. She chuckles darkly, “Ah, yes... many of us here agree with you.”

“Why did he make it so damn big?” Reaper growls as they set off down the platform steps to the street. The merc continues to look towards the massive power plant, grumbling, “And why does it glow?”

“Pfft, what doesn’t glow here?” Sombra retorts as they make their way down the streets, winding inwards. People continue to give curious, long looks to Reaper, but seem content with his bizarre mariachi styling and continue to their own separate ways. Sombra just shrugs her shoulders, bouncing along to keep pace with his strides as she states, “But we don’t know why he made it so big. Rumors say it has something to do with the way the fusion cores are designed and how they disperse power.”

“...Rumors say?” Reaper asks keenly as they turn up a side street, “Or you say?”

...Observant asshole.

“It is actually the rumors,” Sombra admits, “I have not actually managed to find a reason for why the pyramid is designed that way -”

“But you have been looking.”

They stop in the half-shadows of the side street, which causes her paint to radiate faintly in the semi-darkness.

Sombra turns slowly, now assessing him the way he assesses her.

Pale, silver-lined skull clashes against pale, iridescent green skull.

“...Portero is a tyrant,” la muerte de verde whispers to the segador de almas, “He hides in his pyramids behind his medals and awards and fusion cores, but I will drag him from his temple and dash him against the stones if it is the last thing I do.”

The reaper contemplates her critically, tilting his head slightly before he asks in his own low, smoke-dripping murmur:

“...Are you going to stop with just him?”

Sombra jolts slightly at the question but -

But she knows.

She knows she shouldn’t trust him.
Through the cameras, she has watched him kill entire Helix Security squads in old Watchpoints across the Mediterranean. She has watched him shred computer systems and servers with only his clawed hands and his two shotguns.

She has watched him strangle his own partner, beneath the heat of the Southwestern sun and the sandstone dust -

But still.

Sombra knows to mind her manners.

She knows you do not lie to the dead.

“...It depends on what I uncover,” Sombra states to him honestly, and the tense atmosphere, weighted with potential, weighted with stillness, dissolves as Reaper shifts, folding his arms again, saying coolly, “Let me know what you find.”

“¿Qué?” she asks, because she’s not sure she actually heard him correctly -

“Oh, Portero’s corrupt as fuck,” Reaper states in an almost bored tone, “I just want to know what specific kind of corruption he’s got going on. And I always wanna know what sort of connections these dickwads have. They’re all in on it.”

“...In on what?” Sombra says with some uneven bewilderment and Reaper rolls his head again, muttering loosely, “You know - it. Some sort of Illuminati bullshit. They’re all tied up in it together - there are all these connections between these larger forces we can’t even begin to perceive.”

Sombra scowls at him in abject confusion, but Reaper just rolls with his mini-rant:

“But still… we gotta try, right? We gotta try to suss them out. We gotta try to put the pieces together. Only thing really worth doing these days.”

“...And killing people, right?” Sombra says dryly and Reaper points a finger at her, “That and drinking beers on the beach. Glad to see you catching on.”

Sombra snorts and turns back around, leading the way out of the side street and back to a bigger avenue, Reaper following behind her, but with their height difference, he quickly catches up, asking, “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to the Los Muertos base -” she begins but he interrupts, saying, “Wait - can you take me to the places these kickass street wars occurred?”

Sombra gives him a dead, skeptical stare, raising an eyebrow and Reaper stops, adding quietly, “Uh… I mean, can you take me to where these tragic incidents occurred?”

“...They’ve been cleaned up,” she informs and he just snarls sarcastically, “No fucking shit - I don’t expect people to just leave rotting bodies out for days. I just want to Sherlock Holmes this shit, okay?”

“You think you’ll actually learn something?” Sombra questions him as she turns and leads them in a different direction, down to the weapons drop location. Reaper shrugs as much as his charro jacket will let him, replying, “Maybe, maybe not. I just want to… get a feel for what we’re looking for here.”

...Oh, just you wait, amigo, Sombra thinks dryly.
She is definitely in over her head on this halfassed plan.

But still -

*El soldado necesita aprender a jugar bien.*

And if she has to teach him the hard way -

Then so be it.

-------

_Neither plague nor famine tempered my courage_
Nor did raids make me cower
But his translucent skin
Made me shiver deep within my bones

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**Segador: Una Mitad de Dos**

Wednesday, July 8, 2076: 01:17 p.m. - in a side street by the Deadlock Weapons Drop point, Dorado, Mexico

Reaper can taste the deaths lingering in the air still.

It’s been over thirty-six hours since the actual shitshow happened, but the scent of ash and smoke, burned human flesh and singed wood somehow lingers in the edges of the shadows cast by the brightly-colored buildings. The souls of the seven Los Muertos members killed here have long dissipated into the ether, but the atmosphere still weighs heavily with the traces of their existences. There are scorch marks on everything, which covers some of the evidence, but that’s evidence in and of itself.

“...We came through first that night,” Sombra says behind him, as she wanders into the cross-streets after him, “The police only came in the morning. They know not to touch Los Muertos matters in the dark of the night. Course, by they time they got here, we’d taken the bodies.”

“...Do you still have them?” he asks as he peers at flecks of dried blood and neon purple paint at about shoulder-level on the concrete wall. There are small traces of purple paint everywhere - certainly, there are other colors but this one in particular is on the wall, on multiple parts of the cobbled street -

Mingled in the massive, rust-dried bloodstain only a few meters away from the intersection of the backstreet and the narrow alleyway, pieces of melted candy and ripped, brightly-colored cardboard sticking to the solidified liquid of life.

... *Whatever happened here was fucking BRUTAL.*

“...Their bodies?” Sombra says softly, “...No. We gave them a ceremony outside of town and sent them to the sea.”
Pity. Can learn a lot from the wounds.

“...You can’t leave the dead out in July,” she continues and Reaper sighs, “Fair enough. I was simply curious.”

“So... there were two explosions, right?” the merc asks, looking at the damaged power box, before he glances directly behind him, into the darkness of the alleyway. Smart of the asshole to turn the power off, Reaper considers slowly, But then... does that mean he can see in the dark?

...Tactical gear?

An image of a red and black and blue visor, fingers frozen at its side, standing in a rough doorway cut from sandstone -

The visor crashing backwards against the sun-baked earth, his own clawed hand below the chin, squeezing squeezing squeezing -

Fingers tracing gently on the edge of his cheekbone -

Behind the silver-lined mask, Reaper glares at the darkness of the alleyway.

This is beginning to feel less and less like an easy solo tracking mission -

And more and more like a familiar battlefield -

Warred upon by familiar soldiers.

“According to Tomás and Luis, he shot something that managed to blow up the first truck that was out here,” Sombra states coolly as she comes to stand beside him, also peering into the darkness.

“...So he had both a gun and a rocket or frag launcher?” Reaper half-asks, half-growls, because the other option - the option of considering that he only carried one weapon which could both shoot and launch rockets - leaves a bitter, ashy taste in his mouth.

Sombra looks up at him, her face glowing green in the half-shadows cast by the buildings. Her deep brown, almost violet eyes seem to weigh something heavily before she says quietly, “Well, it was dark. They couldn’t see him very well. Perhaps he had both. But he had access to heavy arms at least and potential low-level explosives at worst.”

The heavy pulse rifle sits disassembled in a corner of his mind.

But still -

Reaper glances around the small intersection, noting the small space, the closeness of the buildings, the depth of the scorch marks -

“These are close combat fighting quarters,” he notes aloud and Sombra blinks at him in surprise, before saying, “Tomás does not remember much of the fighting - he was knocked out for the majority of it. And Luis said he did not notice the vigilante until Diego whistled to get his attention.”

The heavy pulse rifle is not suited to close-combat exchanges, Reaper thinks, as he peers over the pieces of the gun in his mind. If it is, in fact, Jack doing all this, then he would know how to use it as a melee weapon - he’s the only person in the world who would - but even then, the heavy pulse rifle would be a hindrance in this kind of fight. Fighting with fists would almost be easier, but why use your bare fucking hands when you have a fucking heavy pulse rifle?
To give up that kind of tactical advantage just to crack down on some glo-painted punks in a darkened backstreet alley?

What would be the point?

...Because he could?

But he knows.

Reaper knows he shouldn’t confuse his own line of reasoning with whatever the fuck that pretentious, self-righteous traitor would think.

Strike-Commander Morrison would never do something as badass and as brilliantly dark-spirited as break a bunch of anarchy, nightlight assholes with his bare fucking hands just to prove a point.

...But would Jack?

Down in the concrete alleys of his mind, a figure assembled of pieces of sunkissed, seabreeze stained glass rises from the undergrowth, his eyes that are only blue upon blue upon hurricanes and swirling stormclouds glaring with lightning determination, cracking a biotic field, casting a glow of radiant life as he hefts a heavy pulse rifle in his hands, surrounded by Bastions built of concrete and crumbling ash and dust -

...Don’t fool yourself.

Jack has been dead for years.

Strike-Commander Morrison saw to that.

...And Soldier: 76? the voice whispers to him, Which one is he?

...He does not know.

In his mind, Reaper watches as the brightly-colored stained glass figure shatters, shorn apart by Bastion submachine and Gatling gun fire and -

it hurts it hurts it hurts -

Just watching that figure fall apart into pieces hurts.

It is almost easier to consider that it is someone else - someone else with a vendetta against the gang, which, granted is probably more people than Los Muertos realizes - who decided to take up arms and haphazardly fought these assholes with a rifle and rocket launcher, and fell into using fists when backed into a corner.

Do the tactics change if it's someone else? Does the strategy change if it is Jack?

...He does not know.

He… has never had to think about this before.

“Alright, so we’re looking for someone with a rifle, a possible rocket launcher, and the ability to fight off four fully-grown militant men with his bare fists?” Reaper half-summarizes, half-asks, and Sombra chuckles darkly, “Sounds like it.”

“You understand why I’m rather shady about this information you’re giving me, right?” he growls at
her, “Because it smells like bullshit. Either y’all are lying about how many people attacked you, or Los Muertos is way more fucking incompetent than you’ve lead Talon to believe.”

“...Have you considered that he might be just that good?” Sombra asks him skeptically and Reaper - He glares at that.

“That doesn’t just make him ex-military,” he states to her, “That makes him ex-covert ops, like, ex-Seals, ex-Special Forces, ex-Blackwatch -”

“Well, there are a lot of those running around,” she says to him pointedly, and he growls back, “I’m ex-CIA.”

“My point exactly,” Sombra says smugly and -

Well, she has him on that one. Even though it’s a lie, she’s painted him into sticking to his cover story or admitting he’s ex-Blackwatch.

Literally the ex-Blackwatch.

“...Alright you little shit,” Reaper grumbles, turning back up the street, “Let’s get back to your base.” Sombra grins at him wickedly before she rushes to catch back up to him. They take the long way down the backstreet and connect back to a larger main avenue, out by the Mercado plaza. The little central square is packed with people moving around, crossing the street haphazardly. There are merchants and chefs everywhere, harking their goods and foods and good foods; children run in between the adults. Even a few LumériCo workers - identified by their pastel green uniforms - sit or stand around, eating lunch on their breaks or chatting with one another. The locals give him a quick look over and then move on with their lives, but the tourists stand and gawk, taking pictures of his charro outfit with their phones and datapads and -

“Damn, there are a fuckton of them here, huh?” Reaper asks her in a low whisper and Sombra follows the gaze of his mask to where a group of Chinese tourists are waving to him, and a clueless LumériCo worker nearly runs into them as they block the entire sidewalk. The hacker chuckles, “Well, it is the season for them - they’ll be everywhere from now until October, but there’s even more of them right now since this week is El Aniversario de la Batalla de Setenta y Dos. They’ll crawl all over everything - the forests, the streets, the buildings, the beaches, the Mission - and then just up and leave when the weather gets cooler.”

Reaper frowns because -

This is exactly when a fucker like Jack Morrison would blend right in.

“...If our vigilante is a non-mexicano, then we’re gonna have a helluva time finding him in these crowds,” Reaper mutters to her as she leads them down and up several more side-streets to a building covered in bright spray paint and graffiti.

“Well, that’s why we brought you in, right?” Sombra asks him teasingly as she cracks the door open and they step inside.

He didn’t know what he expected -

But it wasn’t this.

The Los Muertos base is colorful. Every light hanging from the walls is a different hue - pink in one corner, orange in another, green in the center, blue in a different corner, and on and on. Every low
The table is painted a bright color, inscribed with a unique design, every low armchair is upholstered with vibrant fabric. The walls - the walls are covered in bold, lively art murals, swirling rainbows of neon colors and softer pastels. There are skull motifs everywhere - sprayed onto the murals, tiny glass lights hanging on strands from the ceiling -

And the ceiling.

The ceiling is painted with the sun and the stars, day melting into dusk melting into twilight melting into the blue darkness.

Reaper’s dulled senses are flooded with the sheer amount of life in the room.

There is a little kitchen and bar set into one corner, under the orange light, and several stairs leading up to different stories. A bunch of gang members - semi-glowing in the shifting hues of lights - are sitting around different tables, some playing games, others drinking, other arguing loudly over something -

They all pause when the two of them enter the room.

“...We’re back,” Sombra states dryly to them, until one of them shouts, “You brought us a fucking lost mariachi player?”

“That depends,” Reaper snaps back, “How much are you gonna tip me for playing for you?”

“...That depends on how well you play,” says one of them, rising from his seat, and Reaper points a long gloved finger at him, muttering, “I like this one - he’s quick.”

“That’s David,” Sombra informs him, “Our… squad leader, if you will.”

“Cool, you punks are militarizing, fucking great,” Reaper growls before -

Smoke engulfs him.

“¿Qué chingados está pasando?” someone shouts as more cries of “Holy shit” and “Mierda” and “What the fuck” fill the room. Sombra jumps like three meters away from him, but the smoke clears as quickly as it comes, taking the charro outfit with it and leaving -

“...What a party trick,” Sombra says wryly as Reaper rolls his shoulders, feeling his combat suit settle back on his frame, the hood weighing just right on his head, the claws fitting back on his fingers perfectly.

“I told you I wasn’t gonna wear that outfit forever,” he grumbles, “If one more asshole takes a picture of me today, I’m gonna hurt someone.”

And then he tilts his head at her, grinning beneath the mask:

“Besides, I’m not going out during the day anymore.”

Reaper turns and strides over to the kitchen area, as Sombra and David and a few other Los Muertos members follow him. He opens up the fridge, peering inside as he asks, “So is it just the people here? What am I working with?”

“There are several more members out in the city,” the one called David says, “But we can tell them to come to the base, if you want.”

Reaper rifles through some of the food and drinks before he finds a bottle with the label “stout” on it
and pulls it out, assessing it critically before determining he is, in fact, going to drink it. He twists back around, shutting the fridge with a boot, saying, “Nah, we don’t need them yet. Have there been other disturbances in the city?”

Sombra and David glance at each other, before the “leader” of the “squad” admits, “We haven’t been looking into that.”

“Great. Excellent. Glad to know that all we’ve got to go on is two half-conscious descriptions of the fight,” Reaper snaps at them, before cracking the lid on the bottle with a claw and forming a straw out of smoke -

“...Are you shitting me,” Sombra states in utter disbelief, and even David looks confused and horrified at the same time.

“Once again, I have to remind you that it is fucking unwise to insult the assassin your little gang of misfits invited into their base,” Reaper growls, before poking the straw into the hole of his mask and taking a loud, obnoxious sip.

Sombra’s eyelid twitches slightly.

“...Alright, here’s the deal,” Reaper states, withdrawing the straw, “We need a pulse on anything unusual going on. Tourists are one thing, but a vigilante will make themselves known through other means. We need to figure out if he’s here just to fuck with y’all, or if he’s got something else going on. Although, putting more Los Muertos on the street is gonna draw him out anyways -”

“I will NOT risk more of my members,” David replies fiercely, but Reaper notes how Sombra rolls her eyes a little at that. The merc flicks his gaze back to the “leader,” pointing at him as he explains, “I don’t care how you get more info, just get it. But, fearless leader, you’re gonna have to own up to the very real possibility that this dude is out for your blood and your blood alone. An attack like that isn’t something someone does in their spare time, and frankly, if it is something someone did in their spare time, then we’re extra fucked because we do not want to mess with someone who can pull that shit at the drop of a hat. Capiche?”

David glares, but remains silent. Sombra, on the other hand, looks intensely thoughtful over his words. Reaper takes another loud slurp from the straw, before he starts again, “Our best bet is gonna be overwhelming or ambushing him. But the problem with this is that we gotta decide if we’re gonna go close-range or long-range. Hypothetically, if he is carrying a rifle and a rocket launcher, we wanna get in close and end it fast, but if he’s as good at close-quarters fighting as your two Action News Correspondents say, then we could be pushing our luck there too.”

The merc takes another drink, enjoying the slow, deep flavor before he finalizes his little speech, “Now, you called me in, which is - honestly - fucking shocking because a good sniper would solve your problem real easy, assuming you can find the guy. But since you have me running this little fucked up tracking mission, you’re gonna have to deal with how I do things. I am a close-combat fighter, and almost nothing is gonna rock-paper-scissors a shotgun blast to the head, but if I’m gonna get close enough to him to put a pellet in his skull, then I need to know how, when, and where I can fucking stealth him and that’s not gonna happen unless I know more about him. Or we set a trap. Which would involve throwing all your fucking members into alleyways and hoping he picks the right one. So, friend, take your pick: get me more info, or put your people on the beat.”

David’s glare has only deepened and darkened with his words, but Sombra -

She smirks.
Reaper still hasn’t decided if that’s a good thing or a really fucking bad thing.

“...I can pull files from the comisionado,” Sombra says, “See if there’s anything that stands out there. Someone has to have seen something during the fight - they at least heard those explosions.”

“Look at that,” Reaper sneers to David, “She’s got some initiative here. Now, give me the rundown on the weapons y’all got.”

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*It was a pale white horse*
With a crooked smile
And I knew it was my time

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**Soldado: Otra Mitad de Dos**

Friday, July 9, 2076: 11:48 p.m. - in an alley on the north side of LumériCo’s Dorado plant, Dorado, Mexico. (6:48 a.m. in Numbani)

He listens to the shuffling of heavy feet on dense carpet and increasingly frustrated sighs on the comms line.

76 smirks.

It’s only taken twenty years, but he finally gets to hear Guillermo Portero die of boredom. He’s crouching down, stuffed into the southeastern corner of the LumériCo pyramid, on the landing of stairs leading to the southeastern side door, looking out at another set of steps leading up to a second story patio above an apartment complex. He’s surrounded by half-shadows and the tarnished lighting of distant streetlamps and the glow cast through shutters. Despite the speckled radiance of the city, dotted with sweet simmers, the stars shimmer and sparkle overhead, bright and empowered by the depth of the blue night around them. The moon hangs like a silver mirror to the east, casting white-gold light across the softer darkness of the sea, its waters painted with the sky submerged into its abysses. The atmosphere is both dense and airy, weighted and ephemeral, woven from light mists and shadows and darkness, studded with frozen raindrop stars and tarnished gold bell lights.

The air here is lighter.

It carries the sharp, salty tang of the sea, only a cliff-jump away.

The slow blueness of the night soothes his soul.

76 rolls his head, stretching his shoulders slightly, feeling the heft of the heavy pulse rifle shift in his hands. The muffled noises of Portero’s office, coming through the comms, continue to lull him into a shaded complacency, and the soldier has to remind himself to stay focus and not stargaze.

The three nights and days have been blissfully uneventful since his battle against the Los Muertos members. As he had predicted, there hadn’t been much that was useful in the remaining weapons crates (that weren’t damaged in the blast), so he’d gone back to his post at the south end of
LumériCo and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Until the guards had rotated shifts and 76 caught one of them - one of the sleepier ones - completely unaware. He hadn’t killed him, but knocked him pretty solidly unconscious. 76 had then taken the guard’s access card and, with surprising ease considering he was still decked out in tactical visor and scorched leather jacket while hauling his heavy pulse rifle on his back, had entered the building without incident. He had known the cameras would catch him, but he had planned his next few steps from the moment he’d conceived of stealing an access card. He had bolted straight to the guard station, knocking out the single security dude there and then -

He had made himself five more access cards from the 3D printer there.

As they were printing, he’d opened up the security computer and registered three of them to false names - one to his fake American civilian ID, another to a random “American” name, one to a “European Spanish” name, and, because he was a paranoid fuck, he’d left the other two active but blank, in the event the other three were discovered to be false and their access “locked up.” And then, before the guard could even stir in his sleep -

76 had been back outside, darting down dark alleys and shadowy streets back to his rented room by the Mission.

Back in his room, he’d set out doing four things:

1. Making false resumes and identifications for this three “new names.”
2. Hooking up the tactical visor to the Lindholm IFF-tracking analyzer program in his datapad.
3. Fiddling with one of the mini-microphone recorders he’d taken from Grand Mesa.

At about the same time that he’d finished the resumes, the tracking analyzer had pinged on his datapad, and 76 had turned his attention to the new patterns it had developed: a neon-paint identifier, a skull-pattern analysis, a skeleton-pattern system, hairstyle patterns (which he had chuckled over). He’d approved them, then reuploaded the analyzers and identifiers into the visor itself, adding them to the list alongside “Helix logo,” “LumériCo logo,” Talon tactical masks, and Deadlock branding patterns.

He had then synced up the mini-recorders with the comms channels on the visor.

And then he’d gotten some long-deserved sleep.

Bright and early on the morning of the seventh, he’d put on the only “business” clothes he’d brought along - a casual button up and loose pants, stuffed several of the recorders in his pocket, and jammed the resumes, IDs, and registered key cards in a small bag. 76 had swung by the Panaderias Las Nieblas for a roll and a cup of coffee. It had been a surprisingly pleasant breakfast as Alejandra had been bouncing off the walls, and he’d listened to her with a self-satisfied smirk as she’d chattered away about some superhero who’d beat up “those Los Muertos assholes - oops, I mean, jerks” as her mother Silvia had glared at her daughter from behind the counter. He’d offered a few pithy remarks to essentially egg on Alejandra’s energy, which had only caused Silvia to turn a deadpan, hawkish look at him instead (worth it to hear the girl give a third retelling of the previous night’s events as she stocked the shelves with more bread).

As the bakery had started filling up with more customers and the mother-daughter duo had turned
their attention to more pressing concerns, 76 had given them a wave from the door -

And then he’d headed to work.

“Ah, hola,” he had said hesitantly to the frazzled-looking guards at the southern entrance of the LumériCo building. They had turned to look at him with confusion and 76 had prattled on in breaking, halting Spanglish, “Uh, is this - wait, lo siento - ¿esto... es... la entrada?”

“...Sí,” one of the guards had replied, before adding, “We can speak English too.”

“Oh, whew,” 76 had sighed fakely, a look of “relief” blooming on his face, “Sorry, my Spanish is super rusty. I’m here, uh -” and he’d glanced around conspiratorially before leaning in close to the guard and whispering, “~I’m here from Grand Mesa. Jim Moreno?”

The guard had scowled, but headed into the small guard house only to return with a datapad.

“...ID?” the guard had asked, and “Jim” had handed over his access card, American passport, and resume. The guard had flicked a blacklight over the passport, scanned the access card with the datapad, and barely glanced over the resume.

“...Ah, yes, I see you on here,” the guard had stated, before handing back his stuff. 76 had smiled brightly as the guard mumbled, “Sorry, sir, we have, uh - we’ve had a very busy morning. And there have been many Americans coming in and out in the last few weeks. It is difficult to keep track of them.”

“I bet,” 76 had chuckled lightly, “And I’m sure the tourists don’t help, hmm?”

The guard’s bitter face had said it all, before he gestured to another guard, saying, “Felipe here will take you to el Departmento de Armas and introduce you to Señora Moyano.”

“Gracias, señor...?” 76 had replied, holding out his hand. The guard had taken it, saying, “Angel Burciaga, señor Moreno. Encantado. I look forward to working with you.”

“Igualmente,” 76 had grinned back, before letting the guard named Felipe lead him inside. Once in the seaglass-green lighting of the building, 76 had scowled briefly:

Of course you have a fucking weapons department, Portero.

Felipe had lead him to an office, where he was introduced to a rather frustrated, terse woman who had snapped, “Who are you?” at him. 76 went through the same song and dance, showing his resume, his ID, putting together some bullshit story, relying on his memory of the files he’d pulled from the Grand Mesa servers:

“Jim Moreno, one of the heavy pulse rifle engineers. I was asked to come out here by the CIA to look into the development of the more efficient pulse stocks your team was working on. Although... now that the test model had been stolen and Grand Mesa has been compromised, the CIA is thinking of moving construction out here as well.”

It took all of the force of his willpower not to laugh the whole time.

“Ah...yes, okay, sorry, I see you here on the list,” Gabriela Moyano, Chief of Technology, had said, looking at something on her datapad. She had set it down, standing to shake his hand, explaining, “Pardon me, sir, it has been... a difficult few weeks, between the loss of the fusion bomb, our correspondences being leaked, the delay in finalizing the fusion cores for our Gulf Coast plants...”
“And I’m sure my bosses haven’t made it any easier, right?” 76 had joked, because, frankly, it wasn’t a joke - the CIA always made everything more complicated than they needed to. Gabriela had given him a knowing glance before leading him around the facility.

She’d even been generous enough to show him where the pulse rifle stocks were being kept.

She had been even more generous to show him where the portable pulse rifle mini-fusion generator was being assembled.

76’s eyes had lit the fuck up over that.

“It is nearly completed,” she had informed him as 76 had watched the little robot arms place small pieces onto the generator in the center of the assembly room. He had asked, distantly, as if submerged, “What are you using as the source pulse stock ions?”

“Purified water steam and ozone,” Gabriela had told him, “The objective was to make it easy to resupply in the field.”

I take back everything I’ve ever disliked about you, Portero.

Thank you for the gift.

“Indeed. This was the biggest blockade to mass-producing pulse rifles for field agents,” 76 had replied, not bothering to hide his smirk, “I am glad to see that LumériCo’s fusion core technology is enough to work around this issue. Hydrogen and helium would be more ideal for increased firepower, but they are far more difficult to come by on a field mission.”

He’d pulled out his datapad, opening it up to a blueprint of the heavy pulse rifle, asking “I take it the generator attaches to the gun’s superconductor?”

“Yes, right in here -” Gabriela had explained, pointing to the ports on the superconductor that makes up the central core of the heavy pulse rifle. 76 had mumbled, “So this increases the energy output of the superconductor and makes ion separation and discharge more efficient, then? Utilizing only water and ozone? Spectacular.”

“A tragedy that the Soldier stole the experimental gun,” Gabriela had said, and 76 had just chuckled, “Well, rebuilding isn’t difficult. The superconductor is the hardest part, but with LumériCo’s fusion generator, we should be cleared to reinitiate development almost immediately.”

After that, she had generously set him up at a computer, given him a LumériCo seaglass-green jacket, and then left him alone.

He had promptly stolen all of their data on the heavy pulse rifle and its munitions.

That had actually been the easy part - Gabriela had left him with access to the development program and all of its files.

After that, he had gone around and introduced himself to a few other people, chatting and gleaning small bits of information - there were structural weaknesses in their online securities, the Chief of Security was looking into moving their information to other servers, someone had broken in last night, Los Muertos was getting more and more violent in the city, the works. He had also learned that Portero was not in town - that he would not return to the last and final LumériCo power plant until late Friday evening.

That evening, they had gone to one of the bars to share a round of drinks that 76 had somehow
managed to turn into several rounds of drinks. When Portero’s Dorado secretary had fallen out of his seat laughing over some stupid joke, 76 had helped him back up, laughing along. Later, when they were leaving the bar, 76 had smacked his forehead, remembering something he’d forgotten in the power plant, and parted ways with them to head back to the LumériCo building.

Once inside, he’d used the secretary’s key card to quickly and quietly slip into Portero’s office and plant several of the recorders in small places - by some of his computer’s speakers, in between some of the keys of his keyboard, stuck to the underside of the monitor - the standard works Gabriel had drilled into habits in his Blackwatch agents.

On his way back out of the building, he’d stuck the keycard on the secretary’s desk.

He hadn’t seen a single Los Muertos member all day.

Or the next day.

The eighth was just as uneventful: he’d done the same routine - Las Nieblas, gone to LumériCo, used the resources there to update the heavy pulse rifle’s design, figured out how he wanted to implement the new generator into the inner workings of the gun, looked through the mechanisms required to separate the steam and ozone particles into charged ions, double-checked the basic chemistry of it, and tested the quality of the “water” plasma-pulse stocks. They were different from his current hydrogen/helium stocks (obviously), and he would have to adjust the core temperature of the superconductor, but the switch to water/ozone would lower the risk of overheating the gun and causing erroneous discharge, which had always been the major drawbacks of using pulse munitions. And the fusion generator would increase the life of the superconductor, another major flaw that had hindered mass production of the rifle. It had been a problem that both Torbjörn and Winston had said could hypothetically be fixed, but they did not have the means of generating that much energy in a compact format.

He had still been mulling over the design of the mini-fusion generator - where did LumériCo come up with that idea? - when he’d nearly run into a group of Chinese tourists in the middle of the mercado plaza on his way to lunch.

“哦，对不起啦 (tn: oh, sorry),” 76 had snapped at them, rather brusquely and sarcastically. They were taking pictures of some tall lone mariachi guitarist on the other side of the street, which only caused 76 to roll his eyes - never seen a charro outfit before? - and continue to the torta stand for a quick sandwich.

The rest of the eighth and most of the ninth had been rather easy. It wasn’t until mid-afternoon earlier that day that Gabriela had asked how his supervisors in the CIA had reacted to the final model of the mini-fusion generator. 76 had lied through his teeth, said they were pleased with the finalized prototype, and that they were eager to reinitiate the weapon’s development.

Gabriela had replied that she would be “happy to discuss the new design with them when they arrive on Sunday.”

And that -

That was his cue to fucking leave.

Every instinct, every old habit, every reflex told him it was time to get the fuck out.

Unable to settle back down, 76 had headed down to the mini-generator’s assembly room, collected the prototype, swung by the pulse stockroom, took everything off the shelves, and left for the day.
He had gone back to his room, connected the prototype fusion generator to the superconductor, and reassembled the heavy pulse rifle. He’d backed up his new files on his datapad, dressed in his usual combat kevlar, snapped on his tactical visor, and headed back out into the growing shadows of the twilight.

From the half-darkness of the evening light in a side alley, he’d watched Portero - looking far worse for wear than 76 had last seen him - enter the west entrance of LumériCo, surrounded by secretaries and guards.

76 had worked his way around the south side of the building, getting as close to Portero’s east-facing office as he dared, and flipped over to the recorder channels.

The first few hours had been a blur of Spanish - exhausting, endless chattering and bickering and discussing topics that ranged from the delay of the Dorado fusion core’s development, to the need for new servers, to the break-in by “el soldado” the other day, to the increased and then decreased Los Muertos activity, the need to “get in contact with the Juarez base,” the need to meet with the executives of the Bank of Dorado, the need to get more of the city “in agreement” over the power plant, the need to increase security around the plant itself, the works. Despite his fluency in Spanish, the sheer speed, volume, and intensity of the conversation - leap-frogging from subject to subject - had nearly deafened 76, causing him to miss a lot of the details of the conversations.

Still, the discussion over “el Soldado: Setenta-y-Seis” had just confirmed that his time actually infiltrating LumériCo was over.

And while he can’t remember the exact date when he last met with Portero, he wouldn’t put it past the old general to recognize him immediately.

But it was when Portero had kicked out all his chiefs and secretaries that the night had gone from “expected” to “what the fuck.”

76 had scowled over the heavy, exhausted sighs, the muffled, weighted footsteps, the sound of liquid pouring and glass clinking. The creak of a chair and the tap-tap-tapping of fingers on a keyboard told him when Portero had returned to his desk.

The soft, vehement, violent swears of “pinche pendejo,” “qué chingados, esto es pinche mierda” had told him that things were beginning to coalesce.

And then Portero had hit a few buttons -

And a slow, low artificial “ringing” had started.

76 had held his breath, waiting for the -

The disconnected tone had jangled into the night.

Both Portero and 76 had sworn over that.

And so now, here they are:

Two old soldiers, inching precariously closer to the early hours of the new day, slowly dying of boredom as the LumériCo CEO struggles to get his fucking call to connect.

The call tone is ringing, ringing -

At least he gets a chair and fucking glass of whiskey or something, 76 growls to the stars of his mind,
twiddling his fingers on the base of the heavy pulse rifle. Gabriel had complained long and loud about the boredom of recon missions and he’d always listened with tolerance and patience and as much sympathy as he could muster for hearing the same frustrations over and over and over, year after year after year.

Ringing, ringing -

But now, only now

Does 76 truly fucking know.

…I am so sorry I ever rolled my eyes over this, Gabe, 76 thinks to the air, rubbing a mostly-healed, gloved knuckle to his aching temple. He shifts his legs, feeling the stiff blood try to start flowing properly again, pleading with all the stars in the sky, If you could just drop a fucking beer or a whole handle of tequila into my lap that’d make this a lot easier -

There’s a click on the comms.

76’s thoughts die as he tunes back into the sounds coming through the visor.

“...Do you have any idea what time it is here?”

The voice that comes out of the computer monitors has a slight clip to the otherwise impeccable English, and 76 scowls as he processes the accent:

East Indian.

“And do you have any idea how long I have been trying to contact you?” Portero’s voice is gruff and crumbling, drenched with the depth of whatever alcohol he’s been drinking and the hoarseness of the years weighing on him, “It has been hours -”

“Which is precisely why I am asking you,” the other man responds sharply, “Because you have been trying to reach me since five-thirty in the morning.”

“I do not have the time or patience to deal with your complaints, Korpal,” Portero growls back and 76 freezes, his breath locking up in his chest as the name -

Sanjay Korpal, Lead Design Architech of Vishkar’s development branch -

Runs through his head, even as Portero is continuing to grumble, “I have had a horrible week and I do not need you and Vishkar compounding my problems. It is nearly midnight here and I am tired of you dodging my questions for the past month.”

“...I take it the email was not satisfactory,” Korpal says with sleep-cracked dryness and Portero snorts, “You’re damn right it wasn’t, pinche pendejo. Think you can just send me some paltry pithy response and expect that to make things better?”

“...No, I thought I could send you a compassionate, understanding response and we could settle this like the civil individuals we are,” Korpal replies with increasing darkness to his tone, but Portero is undaunted. The LumériCo CEO simply snaps back, “I have zero patience for your Public Relations talk right now, Korpal. I need real answers and I need them now. My investors and the Federal Government are breathing down my neck about your work -”

“As I wrote to you, the affairs going on in Rio are nothing more than bitter and malicious slander -” Korpal begins but Portero interrupts him sharply:
“That boy is still streaming his concerts and revolution rants all over internet.”

76 frowns, because the conversation took a hard fucking swerve and jumped off a damn cliff in his head. Silence fills both his mind and the conversation, until Korpal cracks the quiet with, “He is delusional -”

“He has an audience of 200 MILLION PEOPLE, including major talking heads in Hollywood,” Portero states boldly and 76 is still just as lost as he was twenty seconds ago, watching the car carrying his understanding of the conversation he’s eavesdropping in on crash into the rocks at the base of the cliff.

“Hollywood is not one of your investors -” Korpal retorts fiercely but Portero is on the verge of shouting at him, “Hollywood governs the major media outlets in the United States. They may be nothing more than a bunch of rich bleeding heart pansies in real life, but they run how stories are told and right now Lúcio is their up and coming star.”

76 makes a deadpan face to the inside of his visor, and then pulls his datapad out of his pocket, tapping the name into the search feature.

“If anything he says has a modicum of truth and he chooses to sell that, Vishkar is fucked,” Portero growls out to the Vishkar architech. Meanwhile, 76 frowns because the first search result is a song on a music-hosting website, and the second is some sort of blog post by a Korean professional gamer with “I support Lúcio” in the subject line. He opens up the music page, scrolling through the artist’s about: “Viva o brasil! All my music and podcasts are inspired by the things I see hear feel and the people around me. Currently livestreaming the revolução and the fight against corruption and Vishkar. Please send all donations to the Rio Red Cross!”

76 is flicking over to a past livestream of some sort of live-concert-protest filmed from a crowded, narrow street in Rio de Janeiro when Portero’s voice cuts through the blue of the night like an obsidian dagger:

“…He has said - on live streams - that children are going missing.”

76 stops.

The night grows dense.

(“- I am the ugly side of protecting peace that they never want to see, never want to know -”)

The claws of his soul dig into his heart and lungs -

“That is simply not true -” Korpal is saying weakly over the comms but Portero snarls, “…You told me you would not build an Architech Academy in Rio!”

His mostly-healed knuckles burn.

The lightning plasma pulse of his blood floods.

(“- I went out there and made it real.”)

“We are merely… testing the waters -” Korpal says and -

I’m going to merely test your fucking face, 76 decides.

“Brazil is not India!” Portero shouts, and 76 is shocked by the intensity in his voice. The LumériCo
CEO growls, “You may have every politician in India in Vishkar’s pockets, but Brazil is different -”

“You’re right - Brazil needs our guiding hand -” Korpal starts to snap but Portero just plows on with his low, gruff rumble, “Brazil was heavily reformed by Adawe, Morrison, Reyes, Zhou, and Ziegler ten years ago. You will have a FAR harder time trying to buy their politicians than in India or Mexico.”

For what it’s worth, 76 feels a small swell of pride over the bizarre recognition Portero is giving his past self and team.

“The Academy is a school,” Korpal insists but Portero snarls, “I am not the one who needs convincing - I already know what your scheme is. But you won’t be able to trick the politicians in Rio to look the other way. They’re all still suspicious over Calado. As are my investors and half the Mexican government!”

The two men lapse into silence and 76 hears Portero gulp down the rest of his drink. After a moment, Korpal sighs, “...Will it reassure you if I explain our plans to you?”

“...You have nothing to lose at this point, Korpal,” Portero grumbles back. Korpal heaves a massive breath before saying, “My best architech was away on personal leave for several days. Now that she has returned, I plan to leave her in charge of our projects here in Numbani, and then I will take a team that is… more qualified to handle such a… delicate situation to Rio with me. We will handle the discontentment and the… rumors will stop.”

Thanks for letting me know where I can find you so I can test your fucking face, 76 seethes, but Portero grumbles again, “...It would be wiser to buy out the boy.”

…I take back my gratitude from the other day, jackass, 76 thinks to the LumériCo CEO dryly, but Korpal replies, “I will keep that in mind. Perhaps… he can be negotiated with. He could be a very… persuasive spokesperson for the company.”

...Listen, I don’t know the guy, but if he’s redirecting fan contributions to the Red Cross, he’s not gonna accept your corrupt money, the soldier figures, but then he also realizes, But neither of you have ever had to learn that lesson, so I guess this is gonna be your first time discovering that some people are motivated by things other than material wealth.

“We have some new technology that might appeal to him if he is willing to negotiate with Vishkar -” Korpal is starting to say when -

Something fucking pegs 76 in the side of the head.

He’s already on his feet, whipping the heavy pulse rifle in the direction the thing came from.

WHAT THE FUCK, he shouts in his mind, glancing very briefly at the fucking rock that clatters to the dull, boring concrete. When his eyes flick up to the second-story patio just ahead of him -

There’s a pastel, glowing green skeleton waiting for him.

…I knew you hadn’t learned.

76 is lifting the heavy pulse rifle in their direction but -

They back up behind the corner of the apartment building.

“Get back here,” he growls, bolting after them, rounding up the last set of stairs and -
Wait -

Skidding up onto the red-orange tile of the second-story patio, only dimly lit by the faint flickering of tarnished, burnished gold -

76 stops.

*You fucking moron, this is such an obvious trap - STOP -*

He doesn’t know.

He doesn’t know who’s voice that is in his head - Jack, Gabriel, Ana, Reinhardt, Adawe, his mother, someone else with a low, smoky rasp that sounds like ashes to ashes and dust to dust -

Standing before him, under the tarnished, burnished light and white-gold moonlight is the green figure, their skull face angular and dotted with small triangular cuts. They’re just standing there, staring at him and -

In a fraction of a second his brain has registered the deep, purple eyes, the sharp, dyed mohawk, the faintly-glowing purple-pink biopanels on the sides of her head -

“...*Pobre soldadito.*”

“Oh. God. Dammit,” 76 snarls. She puts her left hand on her hip, the other hand curled around that damned automatic submachine pistol in her right, and gives him the most vicious, *wicked* backlit smirk-sneer.

“You have not played very nice, Soldado,” Sombra hisses at him and he tilts his head towards her, growling, “You started this shit first, remember? And Los Muertos? I should have fucking known you were part of them.”

“Don’t you know it’s poor taste to disrespect the dead?” the hacker taunts him, but her eyes hold a cold, hard glint in the white-gold light of the moon and 76 half-laughs, half-cracks, “The dead? You and your friends make a mockery of the very people you claim to represent, and then ruthlessly bully and harass and even beat those who so much as look at you sideways.”

“And you?” Sombra snaps at him, “You think that means you can do exactly the same thing? You think you can just murder people on the street? You think you’re dealing real *justice* like that, *soldado*? You’re nothing but a *monster*, hiding in the dark, beating people to death! Some of those people were actually my friends -”

“I do. I fucking think I am allowed to because *slaughtering Omnis in the street is murder*,” 76 seethes, stepping closer, looming over her, “Using weapons made from cannibalized Omnic parts is a *fucking rights abuse.*”

Sombra swallows her fear, but he stares her down, the red upon red upon red of the tactical visor clashing hard against the green of her paint.

“...*Your friends* threw a grenade at me and nearly killed an innocent bystander,” 76 states to her with raw hurricanes in his words.

“...And would they have thrown that grenade if you had not been there?” Sombra retorts but -

“They stole fucking pocket change from a goddamn child.”
Her face shifts from rage to confusion as he whispers to her with white-gold frozen raindrops poisoning his words:

“I will never play nice with people who assault and steal from the innocent and the dead, even if they look down on them as ‘dead Omnics.’ Everything that happened to your friends is what they deserved.”

Sombra’s face fills with dark, bitter shadows of fury and -

She snaps her fingers.

Something begins to ping -

“...Te mereces esto (tn: you brought this on yourself),” she whispers to him, her skull flashing like green lightning and 76 pulls away half a step -

“...Did you find him?”

[It was the raging storm]

The soldier stops.

He’s already twisting around -

[Of a foreign war]

Blue upon blue upon black shades of the night are drawing together, pulling smoke and ash and white-gold-silver light into itself. It drips and liquefies and coalesces into something solid, something solid-liquid-plasma-gas, rising into a familiar figure built of blue upon black upon white upon red and gold and amber -

“Let’s finish this quickly -” the low, familiar smoky voice is growling out as the frozen moonlight calcifies into a hard, angular skull -

The reaper stops.

[And a face I'd seen before.]

“...You gotta be fucking shitting me,” they say -

Together.

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Chapter End Notes

:^)

Next week: Medianoche.
Overture: Medianoche - Destrozarse

Chapter Summary

Once upon a midnight dreary

Chapter Notes

Song is "Let It Matter" by Johnnyswim ([Youtube link](https://www.youtube.com))

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Warning: lots of pictures.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Overture: Medianoche - Destrozarse

I don't want to feel better

I don't want to feel good

I want to feel it hurt like losing someone should.

I'm gonna let my heart break

I'm gonna let it burn

I'm gonna stake my claim with the flame I know we’ve earned.

Run, baby, run -

Don't you know I've tried,

But escape is a waste, ain't no use in hiding -

you know the best way over's through.

--------
Saturday, July 10, 2076: 00:00 a.m. - on a second story patio south of the LumériCo power plant, Dorado, Mexico

“Gabriel, wait -”

There is already a shotgun being leveled towards the soldier’s heart.

But the soldier is already moving.

He’s dropping into a crouch, twisting as he falls, whipping out his left leg as he turns, and at the same moment the shotgun is firing, he’s sweeping the feet out from under the hacker - she’s shouting something as she falls too, the sunflared blast of the shotgun pellet barely missing her face. The soldier’s leg sweep only carries his momentum 270 degrees, so he ends up facing to his original right side, but he’s already rolling away, clutching his heavy pulse rifle to his chest as a second shotgun blast burns into the ground where he’d just been -

“I’M RIGHT HERE, ASSHOLE,” Sombra is shouting as some of the shrapnel bounces off the tiled patio and sears into her skin, stinging and needling, but it’s fucking blatant that the mercenary isn’t paying attention to her, his left gun following the soldier’s movements, as he pulls yet another shot -

But it hits only air -

76 goes.

The moment he’s back on his feet, he’s rushing to the reaper, the shotgun blast smattering violently into the floor and wall behind him, hot on his heels, but his enhanced speed means his feet are moving faster, his legs are burning stronger than ever, synthetic chemicals and proteins and carbohydrates flooding his blood and making it flash plasma -

The soldier runs inwards, towards him, startling Reaper, who has all off a fraction of a second to think -

You’re out of position, Jack -

Before the heavy pulse rifle is battering his left shotgun straight into the sky, red upon red upon red burning into his view and it’s all he can see -

There are no traces of blue left in that gaze -

And then in another fraction of a second, his instincts and old habits and furies are dragging the right shotgun towards the side of the soldier’s head -

But the soldier is throwing his left hand across the reaper’s right wrist, pushing the arm out of the way as the buck shot explodes into the air behind his head.

“Let’s fucking talk about this, asshole -” 76 is growling at him, but Reaper is already twisting his armored right knee into the side of the soldier’s left leg - it buckles as lightning spikes of pain needle up the side of his leg, causing the soldier to shout and slide at a diagonal, his grip on the reaper’s right arm slipping, and -

The mercenary is drawing his right shotgun back to press it against the exposed side of Jack’s head -
“You had your chance six years ago,” he snarls but -

Suddenly -

There’s a blur of blue upon blue upon red -

As the soldier *whams* the heavy pulse rifle against the reaper’s head.

Chips of bone snap off the pale, whitegold-silver skull mask at the *sheer fucking force* of it, and flashing, stunning pain nearly blinds Reaper’s vision as his whole upper body twists with the motion -

In the fraction of the second that the right shotgun is pulled away from his head, 76 is snapping his falling left leg out, in between Gabriel’s, curling it around the mercenary’s right leg and pulling it out from beneath him -

*It’s fucking heavy as shit.*

He’s always preferred weighted combat boots to help ground him against the recoil of dual fucking shotguns, and it takes all of 76’s enhanced leg strength to sweep the planted support threading his thigh-calf-ankle-foot together, but it shifts just enough that Reaper wobbles and twitches and begins to fall -

76 is already moving his left hand, reaching it around as he turns with the leg sweep to knocking Sombra’s pistol away from the back of his head, before twisting his arm in and then back out to shove her back forcefully -

Sombra yelps, stumbling back, but 76 is already returning his focus to -

Reaper is *gone.*

Only wisps of black smoke curl against the patio, but the rest of the obsidian mass is shifting around, past the soldier, back behind him, resolidifying into a Hellfire shotgun pulsing against the back of his skull and -

The soldier snaps his right elbow into the unpadded, inner part of Reaper’s right thigh, causing ribbons of tense pain to flare up from his leg into the base of his torso and the mercenary snarls in frustration and *rage* as his shot misses, the soldier is already rolling away from him, twisting around to point the barrel of the pulse rifle at the wraith’s chest.

“*God fucking dammit, motherfucker -*” Reaper is seething as 76 rises back on his feet, now the one closest to the staircase back to the ground. The mercenary is leveling his shotguns to the soldier’s chest, the two of them reflecting each other perfectly and -

“Just fucking *talk to me,*” the soldier half-storms, half-pleads, but the wraith is already raging back, “*I have NOTHING to say to you -*”

“I just want to *talk* about what *happened -*” 76 hurls back desperately, but Reaper bristles under the fucking *insult,* the fucking *audacity* of acting like he doesn’t know what happened -

“A *motherfucking explosion happened, Jack!—*” he screams, he screams, he screams as he pulls the trigger on the right shotgun and -

76 jumps backwards, off the patio and onto the stairs behind him.
The shot rings out in the air and god fucking dammit -

The soldier is half-stumbling, half-backwards-running down the stairs towards the southeastern door of the LumériCo building, the aim of the rifle never leaving Reaper as the mercenary tilts his left shotgun towards him - he’s still in range -

The shot hits empty, blue air as 76 drops to a quick crouch, twisting to his left to continue down the stairs but -

Something is hurled across the air, out from behind the corner of the apartment building, out behind Reaper, clattering on the ground to his left -

Grenade - he starts to think to himself, but it is something far, far worse -

Sombra suddenly materializes out of the air -

“...WHAT,” 76 is shouting at her, rising to his feet as she lunges at him, her biopanels and fingertips glowing purple purple purple purple and the red red red edges of this vision flash pink-orange-pink-purple -

Running only on old instincts and old habits and old reflexes and pure fucking fear-confusion-spite -

He whips the heavy pulse rifle across her.

“MIERDA,” Sombra shouts as the massive gun slams into her - she manages to raise her right arm in time to block the blow from smashing against her head, but the defensive maneuver breaks her hack on the visor, and a split second later she’s sent skidding backwards, running shoes dragging on the concrete landing with a loud obnoxious squeak as her right arm fucking throbs and aches -

Out of the red corner of his sights, 76 sees Reaper point his right shotgun at him -

He takes a half-step forward, keeping just enough distance from Sombra as another miniature explosion of shrapnel and pellets and heat burst across the air where his head had just been -

And then he launches himself to the right, up and over the hand-railing of the staircase, dropping the remaining half-story and landing with a cushioning roll.

Reaper snarls in frustration, hurling his shotguns to the ground and drawing two more out of the liquid, obsidian smoke of his existence, watching with utter rage as Jack - on the ground - darts to the archway under the staircase almost directly below the mercenary.

76 barely has a second to see Gabriel’s mask follow him as he rushes to the concrete archway under the stairs and out to the street. He bolts out into the brighter streetlights, fully exposed in front of the south LumériCo street entrance, causing several guards to jolt and shout at his sudden appearance -

But he’s not concentrating on them because -

A bright blue truck rips up the western curve of the street, just in front of the Banco de Dorado, blasting overblown base. It pulls up just before the LumériCo southern plaza, swerving hard to his right - the truck’s left - and he gets a fraction of a second to see:

Several brightly-colored skeleton figures on the bed of the truck -

Several of them holding rocket launchers -

Several of them holding submachine guns -
And another motherfucking Gatling gun in the dead center.

*HOLY SHIT*, the soldier screams to himself, his boots gripping to a hard stop before he twists his entire body back around to rush back under the cover of the concrete archway, Gatling fire smattering on his heels just as he dives to the right, behind one of the supports of the apartment building.

(*Street exit blocked off.*)

(In an instant, Reaper has the next few steps in his head:)

76 is only behind the concrete brace for a fraction of a second before the blue upon blue upon black air before him fizzes and -

Sombra reappears directly in front of him at the same instant his visor is flashing pink-orange-red-pink-purple -

(*That motherfucking jackass will repel Sombra -*)

He once again throws his weight behind the heavy pulse rifle, slinging it out to shove her away but she’s ready this time, leaping back a half meter lithely as her biosystem signals in her head that she’s *almost* got his visor down -

Suddenly, the end of his rifle glows lightning blue and -

*FUCK*, Sombra shrieks to herself, breaking off the hack and snapping her fingers, instantaneously activating the code and dematerializing-rematerializing herself back up on the landing by the southeastern LumériCo door, as three quick plasma pulses - bright blue upon blue upon blue - miss her and dissipate over the cliff to the sea.

(*He will figure out what’s happening -*)

It does not take even a fraction of a second for 76 to see that he is being surrounded.

To his right is the ground floor open air lounge of the apartment complex, sunshiny yellow with low, cushioned chairs and tables and even a guitar hanging out all alone -

But it’s only supported by several open archways, completely exposed to the west.

(*He ain’t gonna like the ground-level exposure to the west but -*)

But it isn’t like he has much of a choice -

(*He will have no choice -*)

Because there’s heavy Gatling and submachine gun fire blocking off the sub-stairway archway to the soldier’s immediate left.

(*...So predictable, Reaper thinks with disdain, dissolving into smoke and wraithing over the edge of the second story patio, to archways on the ground-level of the apartment building.*)

76 inhales-exhales -

One-two -

And then bolts to the right.
He’s already moving -

He gets all of two meters in before -

His chest is already pressed against the muzzle of a shotgun.

The soldier is already reacting.

He twists the heavy pulse rifle in his hands, swinging it up under the shotgun with his left hand, just barely tilting it up and away in time as the blast narrowly misses his head, the dispersed pellets and shrapnel needle and sting against his scalp, but he’s already shifting, twisting, moving his right hand out and slamming the butt of the rifle against Gabriel’s left shoulder -

Reaper hisses as Jack wails the body of the heavy pulse rifle against him, knocking him to the left as the soldier practically dances out of the way, circling around him, his back exposed to the arch openings and the street behind him. The mercenary sees the truck skid in reverse, the dude on the Gatling gun struggling to keep up with Jack’s too fast, too furious movements -

With his shifting momentum, 76 continues his curving trajectory, letting the force of gravity and the speed of his own enhanced legs keep him one step ahead of the peppering Gatling gunfire - he’s twisting around, moving, lifting the heavy pulse rifle through an angled archway opening, and -

His fingers flick the switch on the auxiliary barrel -

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The helix rockets pop out and whiz across the gap and for a fraction of a second -

There are screams from the men on the back of the truck -

And then it explodes.

Even semi-protected in the open-air lounge, the heat and pressure rolls through the openings, pushing both men to the east slightly, closer to where the blue darkness and the whitegold-silver light radiates down at a perfect diagonal, where frozen fusion raindrops stud the sky and the sea. They’re cast in half sealit moondawn fragments over the east and the tarnished, burnished flicking flames of plasma fires to the west -

They’re cast in brightly-colored shadows.

Only a meter apart from each other -

And a weighted, heavy atmosphere - drenched in mourning seabreeze and furing fires - that breaks them.

“If you would just let me fucking talk -” 76 growls at the reaper, as they skid across the terra cotta tile, and he nearly stumbles over a low table and some sort of couch thing. The soldier hisses, “We can fucking fix this, Gabriel -”

Reaper fucking chokes.

His words taste like ash and obsidian smoke, like singed esophagus and flayed trachea, like burning, melting, fusion gold poured up his throat from his sunsoul:

“’Fix this?’ Fix fucking what, Jack?? Overwatch?? Me?? THE WORLD??”
The wraith leaps forward, lunging for the soldier, ignoring the fact that he has two close-range guns, one in each hand, instead aiming a right hook for that red upon red upon red gaze -

The soldier leaps backward, hurling himself over the low tables and couch thing, landing on the seat and using the extra momentum to fling himself over as Gabriel **roars**, “You had a chance to help me fix this shit five years ago and ignored me -”

“I **tried**, Gabe!” 76 shouts back as Gabriel half-storms, half-glides over the furniture separating them. The soldier yells fiercely, “In case you weren’t fucking aware, our fucking empire was burning down around us!”

“Don’t you fucking lecture me on that!” Reaper sneers, throwing his left arm across his body to aim the shotgun at Jack. He’s already pulling the trigger even as the shot swings, but Jack is **fucking fast** - ducking at the last fraction of a second, the explosive pellets sizzling as some of them hit the leather of his jacket, his hair, his skin -

**That damn fucking mask.**

“Don’t you fucking DARE! Not when you fucking left me behind to burn in the fucking flames!” the reaper howls as the soldier rises again, and the words leave 76 open and vulnerable and **confused**, and he’s stammering, “L-left you behind -?”

The air directly to his left shimmers and pink-orange-red-pink-purple -

**FUCK.**

He’s already moving the heavy pulse rifle towards her.

He’s already pulling the trigger.

Pain **sears** into Sombra’s left shoulder as the plasma pulse hits her like a lightning strike - fire and heat, electricity and wave - surging through her skin and bloodstream and bones and Sombra screams, jumping back and lifting her submachine pistol towards him, spraying bullets. They clip his left shoulder, piercing the leather, but his reactions are enhanced -

Are superhuman.

That laser gaze does not waver against hers and -

He’s shifting the aim of the pulse rifle -

Sombra manages to snap her fingers -

And she teleports to the translocator she left by the red-orange van as another truck screeches around the corner -

In the open-air lounge, still framed by all their weighted existences, the reaper tears his voice, “You **swore** to me!”

76 is attempting to twist back to face him, but it’s a fraction of a second too late -

Pain **burns** into his right shoulder as a left shotgun blast finally connects.

He’s screaming, he’s screaming, Reaper is screaming too, screaming at Jack, “Swore me your whole life, your fucking future, your dreams and all that bullsh**t, and the moment shit hit the fucking fan **NONE of it mattered** -”
“Will you - will you fucking let me talk -” 76 is gritting out, even as he continues to stumble backwards to the southern door of lounge, as chemical endorphins and old instincts and old habits continue to drive him to keep fucking moving, but Gabriel is shouting at him, hurling words and sheer emotional violence:

“NO. Because every fucking time you speak, you twist me into doing something I regret -”

Something in the soldier snaps:

“Regret? How fucking dare you - REGRET?? Do you regret saving the fucking world?? Do you regret all the fucking GOOD we did??”

His feet bump into the southern stairs, leading out of the lounge into -

“NONE of it fucking matters anymore!” Reaper is snarling, lifting his right shotgun towards Jack’s chest, “NONE of it exists! They burned it down under our feet and you fucking let them. And you left me there to burn.”

But the wraith stops because -

There is the sudden glow -

Of golden liquid life in the air.

The biotic field fills the small, staired doorway with a healing radiance and the soldier tilts his mask at him, snarling, “Do you regret us too?”

There is a second of weighted existence and -

“...More than you will ever know.”

Something in the soldier breaks.

[So if it matters let it matter

If your heart's breaking let it ache]

It’s not his heart - that was broken five years ago when there was

A shotgun pointed at it

The other shotgun pointed at Gabriel’s head

And -

(“Gabriel, don’t -”)

Even as the biotic field heals his physical wounds -

He’s already touching fingers to the side of the tactical visor, brushing over the buttons -

[Tactical Visor: ERROR]

The fuck -

[Ally targeted: GABRIEL REYES]
76 fucking chokes.

[ Catch those pieces as they scatter
Know your hurt is not in vain ]

("Look at what I have become -")

[Override Required]  

“Don’t fucking say that -” the soldier is screaming, screaming at him, lifting his gun even as the tactical visor beep-beep-beeps a warning-warning-warning, ally targeted warning, as the Lindholm IFF-tracking program analyzes everything about him - his height, his stance, his voice, his shotguns, everything short of his face because -  

("You left me to suffer in the darkest levels of hell on earth and you let fear make you weak when all I needed from you was to be stronger -")

The Reaper tenses, flinches as a flash-flash-flashing red upon red upon red gaze lifts towards him and there’s the glow of blue lightning warming up at the end of the heavy pulse rifle -

("Gabriel, don’t say that -")

“The world would have ended without us!” 76 hurls right back at him, even as he’s already pulling the trigger, and in just a fraction of a second -

Reaper shifts into wraith form as the bullet of lightning passes through where his chest was, the pulse cutting through the smoke like a knife through a heart -

“Then maybe that’s how it should have been,” the wraith is screaming screaming screaming, even as the soldier takes several steps back, out of the doorway, into a blue nightfall courtyard, drenched in the colors of midnight, as if the sea has risen to swallow them into the depths of darkness -

“Ahi estál” are the words coming from 76’s left and he’s turning, even as the tactical visor is flash-flash-flashing -

[Hostiles Targeted: ON]  

There are four blue diamond reticles gliding into his sights, shifting in from the left as the four Los Muertos members line up under a western archway, lifting guns towards him - behind them, even as the healing glow of the biotic field sinks into her skin and heals her wounded shoulder, Sombra is screaming, “NO, wait -”

The sound of burning, plasma screenglass alights in the air.

The blue nightfall shifts, airy to heavy, ephemeral to corporeal, light to weighted, as the smell of steaming ozone pulse munitions chokes them -

Sombra watches as the plasma pulses shatter against their glo-painted skin, hitting them and spreading out out out like branching fractals, rippling through their bodies as they fall one-two-three-four -

76 is already sliding his vision back to Gabriel - the wraith pursues him, even as the soldier backs into the courtyard, tilting the heavy pulse rifle back towards him. Reaper solidifies, lifting his right shotgun to Jack’s chest, but the soldier is faster than him, darting hard to his right (Jack’s left) and
avoiding the blast. 76 is about to make a break to the west, through the archway to the street, when once again the air shimmers and Sombra’s green skull appears in the shadows.

He fires a pulse shot towards her, even as he continues to move southward across the courtyard, but she ducks away in time, the plasma exploding on a van parked at the corner of the street behind her. 76 whips around again, moving behind a thin, yellow-painted archway into a small open-air hallway as another shotgun pellet explodes against the column.

“I would rather see the whole fucking world burn than see you destroy everything I once loved all fucking over again,” Reaper is screaming at him, as Jack rushes to the next thin column - they barely block anything, but both wraith and soldier know that instincts and old habits die hard, that even though the archway supports are rail-thin, they are better than nothing but the -

The action infuriates Reaper.

[Don't hide yourself from the horror
Hurt today, here tomorrow]

“Fucking fight me, asshole!” he’s snarling to the familiar yet foreign figure darting down the open-air hallway on the backside of the Justice building. Reaper -

it hurts it hurts it hurts -
make it better -

“I have nothing left - I DON'T EVEN HAVE YOU,” he’s shouting to nameless numbers on the back of everything he once loved and -

76 stops.

He twists around because something inside him is breaking -
Boiling down into pure
old
broken
useless
ugly
Anger.

[If it's fragile and it shatters
Let it matter, let it matter]

“...Are you fucking shitting me,” 76 is demanding as Gabriel enters the hallway - they’re squared up under the tarnished, burnished lighting, the glow golden under the chipped yet bright yellow paint, the orange tile reflecting up, blue nightfall moonbeams radiating in from the eastern sea -

“You let them make me into everything I hated - you let them ruin me. I did everything you asked - I infiltrated Talon, I invited that witch into our castle - you pushed me and pushed me and broke my fucking limits and made me into a fucking monster,” Reaper is spewing, snarling, furious in his rage
and rage and rage and hurt it hurts it hurts everything hurts even as he continues to seethe, “And the moment the world turned on me, you turned with them!”

(Under the blue darkness and cloaking, Sombra shifts in, moving closer to the soldier -)

“What the actual fuck,” 76 growls back, even as the tactical visor blink blink blinks a warning warning warning, ally targeted warning, override needed warning, but his senses are flooded with fire and fury and he’s hurling back, “I fucking did not -”

“THERE HE IS!”

76 screams, “Will you fucking asshats let me talk in fucking peace??”

As several more Los Muertos members pile into the courtyard from the southwest opening, between the Justice building and the wine storage -

(He’s going to fire the helix rockets at them, Reaper calculates -)

Reaper is raising his right shotgun, even as the soldier twists to his right (Jack’s left) and -

76 kicks down the fucking back door of the Justice building.

(...what -)

((Sombra glares at his actions, but she immediately hurls a translocator back up to the second story patio -))

[They say, “You know it ain't easy,”]

I wouldn't want it to be

The sea-weathered wood cracks and splinters easily under his weighted combat boot and supersoldier strength, and 76 rams his right shoulder and the heft of the heavy pulse rifle into it, the rest of the weakened door giving way as he barges in. He darts into the hallway, turning left and then right into the main room, stumbling as he takes in the rows of benches, the judge’s desk, raised up on a wooden platform -

((Sombra bursts in through the door that’s never proper locked, rushing out to the railings of the second story over the wooden benches -))

76 sees the main “exit” at the western side of the building.

He runs out to the central aisle -

And is immediately peppered with pistol-spray.

“FUCK,” he shouts, jerking back, up onto the stage, diving behind the judge’s desk for cover. He shifts his gaze up in a fraction of a second, his eyes alighting on that purple form almost directly above him - he growls in frustration, pulling back further into the northeastern corner of the raised platform, moving out of her line of sight as -

“First Amélie -”

Oh god fucking dammit -

The soldier throws himself forward, along the northern wall as yet another shotgun pellet explodes,
shrapnel and burning pellets cracking into the sunshine-painted wall of the northeastern corner, Reaper storming his way onto the raised platform, screaming screaming, “Then Gerárd. Then Ana. Then Reinhardt. Then Jesse. And then you. You fucking left too. You ALL fucking left.”

“I never fucking left, asshole,” 76 is shouting back, as he rises, jumping over the first bench like he’s jumping a hurdle, flipping around to click another plasma pulse at the wraith, who jolts back, covering himself behind the judge’s desk. The soldier uses the brief pause to step up and leap over the second bench as more pistol fire rains down from up top, but -

it hurts it hurts it hurts, Gabriel, wait, it hurts, please -

make it better -

“You left me to be burned at the fucking pyre,” Reaper is screaming screaming sobbing, it hurts it hurts it burns, everything in his sunsoul burns burns burns, melts down into plasma fusion, molten liquid light, like lightning and sun but then the soldier is shouting:

“YOU never came home.”

[Cause ease is for the shallow
But we were from the deep]

The soldier’s red upon red upon red, flashing flashing flashing gaze - like burning lightning - falls on him, even as Jack moves against the northern wall, attempting to dodge Sombra’s pistol fire -

Something inside Reaper breaks.

“...Home? HOME? Our home burned down six years ago when you let them charge me with human rights abuses! Missions, tactics, strategies, abuses you approved!” the wraith howls at the soldier, lifting his shotgun as Jack is firing back, screaming back, “OUR HOME is still fucking standing and you never came home -”

The last words are said with such ache -

Such hurt -

it hurts it hurts it hurts -

(He’s going to break for the door now, the voice inside Reaper says quietly -)

The soldier has reached the northwestern corner of the building - 76 rattles off several pulse shots at Sombra on the second story, and she dives away from the blasts, before he twists and fires another round of helix rockets at the door -

It explodes off its hinges in a burst of heat and pressure and wood -

The soldier goes.

He rushes to the door -

But he skids to a stop as smoke condenses on the western patio steps just outside the exit, and -

There’s the muzzle of a shotgun pressed against his chest.

[I don't want no distractions
Red upon red screenglass gaze stares at red upon red eyes lighting in the dark hollows of the pale whitegold-silver skull mask.

And the words drip over them like plasma obsidian:

“...My home was named Jack and you destroyed him the moment it became too hard to live as him.”

And at that -

**Jack goes off.**

He snarls against his mask, against the weighted press of the shotgun, against the fire and the flood:

“**Me?? YOU were the one who let the enemy into our home - you made a deal with Talon -**”

“To get you out alive, Jack!” Reaper adds, furious and flooding with fire and *it hurts it hurts it hurts make it stop, Jack -*

“...And you couldn’t even do that right,” Reaper whispers darkly -

And then, in a fraction of a second -

76 cracks the heavy pulse rifle across Reaper’s face.

((Sombra bolts through the door on the second floor, out to the patio overhanging the street when she hears the snapping sound -))

**HOLY FUCKING HELL,** the mercenary thinks as the raw, unedged pain breaks across his vision and his hearing and every sense in his body, even as the soldier uses his right hand to twist the left shotgun away from his chest, whamming the heavy pulse rifle across Reaper’s exposed ribs. The padded body armor takes the worst of the blow, but the sheer pressure of it and his disorientation drives Reaper off to the right, sending him shifting and moving and gliding away but -

76 has hooked his left leg in between Gabriel’s and -

He sweeps Gabriel’s right leg out from under him -

“**Motherfucker -**” Reaper is shouting hoarsely as he falls again, his right side slamming against the terra cotta tile, chips of orange breaking free and smattering in the air. The soldier leaps over him, darting to his left (Gabriel’s right) and down a set of side stairs to the southern part of the winding street. He turns to the east, where several Los Muertos members are crowding back out of the corner to the eastern open air patio -

He sees a brief flash of fear on their faces as the diamond reticles light up -

And then he goes off.

[You are worth the joy, my love, 

*you are worth the pain]*

((Sombra watches as the soldier fires on the rest of the brightly-colored death figures and she sneers before switching her cloaking back on -))
((She hurls her translocator over the red-painted wall by the gate to the Mercado plaza -))

Some of them scream and run away in time, hiding behind buildings and columns, but he unloads the clip into three of them before bolting across the street towards a red-painted alley corner, removing the empty pulse stock as he slots a new one into the barrel, finally snapping to the tactical visor:

“Override ally anti-targeting program.”

[Override required: PASSCODE]

“Zero-seven-six-one-two-seven,” he’s saying as he turns back around by a long red-painted wall, watching as Reaper recovers - he’s striding down the side stairs, shouting, “GET THE FUCK BACK HERE -”

[Override passcode: 076127]

[[Jack Morrison] override: ACCEPTED]

[Ally Anti-Targeting: OFF]

“I’M RIGHT HERE, MOTHERFUCKER,” 76 snarls at him as the tactical visor briefly turns the targeting system off for a reboot. It’ll be another minute before it’s ready to be reactivated -

He’s already pulling the trigger -

Reaper shifts into wraith form as several plasma pulse shots rip through his smoke, and he’s gliding towards the familiar yet foreign figure, the soldier who’s screaming at him, “And I was still standing right the fuck there when that happened, wasn’t I?? I was still fucking with you even when you wanted to destroy everything we had ever built!”

“The world was nothing without us! And it is still nothing without us! But you chose it over me all the same!” Reaper screams as he solidifies in front of the soldier, who takes a step back and is about to bolt to the left (Jack’s right) when -

Sombra appears out of the air -

“Will you fucking stop,” 76 snaps at her before continuing his turn and rushing down into the alleyway proper. He’s in the northwest corner of the Mercado plaza now - there’s a yellow apartment building forming the inner part of the corner, the northern opening that he’d just run down, and an eastern opening to the Mercado plaza itself, a set of stairs going up to the second story of an apartment complex on his right. There’s semi-soft sounds of people talking in nearby buildings, but otherwise the marketplace is quiet, calm, empty -

But the storm is coming.

[Run, baby, run

Don’t you know I’ve tried]

Reaper rages after him, even as the soldier flips back around, pointing that heavy pulse rifle right at the mercenary, growling furiously, “You tore my soul apart then you didn’t come home - you didn’t even try -”

The wraith lifts his left shotgun, he’s already pulling the trigger -
But the soldier is already moving.

He’s running down the alley towards the Mercado plaza, when Sombra appears through the northwestern arch by the street gate, her fingertips glowing again, and the edges of his red upon red vision flicker, pink-orange-pink-purple -

76 swipes at her with the heavy pulse rifle, causing her to jump back half a meter and the hack snaps, strands of light on the edges of his sights disappearing, but -

The Los Muertos members who’d avoided his attack arrive through the northeastern arch, firing submachine pistols and rifles at him, and he skitters back, half-stepping, half-jumping up the half-story to the apartment side stairs.

[But escape is a waste, ain't no use in hiding

you know the best way over's through]

76, now facing into the hall of the second story of the apartment complex, tilts his head over his right shoulder, snapping at Gabriel, “We can fix this -”

“I don’t want to fix this,” Reaper hisses back, aiming his right shotgun to the soldier and firing, knowing full well it’s going to miss. 76 quickly moves several steps forward into the hallway, torquing around to face the northern entrance as the shrapnel needles into the wood frame of the doorway.

[If it matters, let it matter

If your heart's breaking let it ache]

He’s already pulling the trigger, even though he knows full well he’s going to miss.

The smoke wisps in, condensing after the plasma pulses hit the red gate wall, and Gabriel - eyes flashing red in the skull of his mask - snarls viciously, “I want you to burn.”

But 76 knows -

76 fears -

76 rages:

“We can fix this but you don’t even want to. You haven’t even tried.”

In a corner of his vision, 76 sees:

[Tactical Visor: READY]

Reaper lifts his left shotgun, pointing it at Jack’s chest.

His words bleed:

“...We’re not worth fixing.”

it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts

“...You don’t believe that,” the soldier denies. The reaper retorts, “I don’t believe in anything since you left me to rot in this fucked up world all alone.”
Catch those pieces as they scatter

Know your hurt is not in vain]

He’s already pulling the trigger.
The soldier is already moving -

He’s jumping out an open window over the marketplace, landing with a thud and a roll in between the torta stand and a fish seller, both closed up for the night. The Los Muertos members are flooding into the plaza from the northeast, and the calm, quiet chatter is beginning to rise with their shouts. People are gathering around windows and doors, but when they see the guns, they scream and duck and flee -

(Reaper tosses his shotguns on the ground, drawing two more out of himself as he snarls, moving towards the window -)

76 takes several steps backwards, watching Sombra in front of him disappear again as several other brightly-colored deaths take her place, firing at him. He lurches himself sideways, hiding behind the tortas stand - in his peripherals, he watches Gabriel jump down from the second story, his weighted boots cracking the tiled pavement of the plaza underfoot, sending up colorful pieces of brittle ceramic around him. Beneath the tarnished, burnished glow of the starlight strands threading across the marketplace -

Gabriel is smoke and sun, obsidian and red and gold and amber, the fire to Jack’s flood and -

[Don’t hide yourself from the horror

Hurt today, here tomorrow]

Even without seeing his face.
Jack knows.

…We can make this better.

Gabriel strides towards him, lifting his right hellfire shotgun -

…We can fix this.

76 dodges the shotgun pellet, rolling backwards up onto his feet. He’s in the southern cross-street of the market plaza now, edging back towards a sunshine-yellow bell tower, where there are a set of stairs that will take him to a small courtyard and a pedestrian bridge. Reaper moves towards him, pursuing as Jack sneers at him, “I’m not going to fucking keel over for you -”

…Yes. Good, the reaper thinks, Fight me.

“As if I’ll fucking let you,” Reaper growls back, several Los Muertos members falling in behind him.
76 is pulling the trigger, snapping out pulse shots, causing the wraith to shift to smoke and several of the brightly-colored deaths to jump away, but the soldier is snapping back:

“I’m not going to let you hurt me!”

…Good, Jack -

“FIGHT. BACK.” Reaper is screaming, taunting, pleading - come on, come on, show him there are
still sights worth seeing, show him there are still things of worth in the world, show him, Jack -

“I’m not going to let you hurt what good is left in the world,” 76 snarls, pushing himself backwards at a diagonal, pushing for the stairs, the tactical visor is starting to hum, and he flicks his fingers over the side, switching the setting:

[Skull patterns: ON]

“STRUGGLE. BACK,” the pale whitegold-silverblack death is screaming, taunting, pleasing and the soldier twists slightly, shooting off several pulse blasts to the Los Muertos members creeping around the east side of the plaza, trying to rush him from around the torta stand.

But the soldier tilts his red upon red screenglass gaze at the red upon red upon hellfire gaze in that pale skull, and he states as boldly, bravely, and brokenly as he can:

“I’m not going to let you hurt yourself either -”

…That’s it, Jack - fight, the reaper thinks as joyfury surges in his soul, Fight everything -

“You fucking asshole,” the soldier snarls as the reaper grins viciously, vibrantly, vehemently, “I want to see you unravel.”

[If it’s fragile and it shatters
Let it matter, let it matter]

The soldier’s left foot hits the lowest step of the stairs and then -

His visor flashes pink-orange-pink-purple -

He’s already moving.

76 whips the heavy pulse rifle to his right, knocking Sombra away. She skids back across tile and into true street pavement, right towards the intersection of the north-bound street and the western one, just southeast of the torta stand and -

“I don’t care if it takes the rest of my life -” 76 is snarling and Reaper is moving closer, closer, raising another shotgun as he screams-taunts-pleads, “I want to see you fall to pieces, Jack -”

“I don’t care if it kills me -”

“I want to see you break -”

“I’m gonna prove you fucking wrong just to spite your ass,” the soldier shouts-taunts-pleads, jumping back several steps as the shotgun blast sears into the wooden door where he’d just been standing. 76 moves up the steps, firing some helix rockets into the space between the torta stand and the pescado shop, causing the Los Muertos members behind Gabriel to scream and rush away.

But he’s staring down at the pale-obsidian death - his partner in everything, even in this - looking up at him from the street, and -

Jack states to him:

“And then I’m going to do what I can to fix this.”
Gabriel glares up at him, sneering:

“Just fucking try, jackass.”

And -

In a fraction of a second -

Though they can’t see each other’s faces -

Jack grins:

“Oh, believe me, I FUCKING WILL.”

The Los Muertos members are regrouping behind Gabriel but the soldier only needs -

(Twenty-nine years, four days, seventy-two hours, far too many minutes, far too few seconds -)

The soldier only needs a second.

His fingers are at the right side of his visor.

Reaper stops because -

...Fucking try me, Jack -

The soldier inhales-exhales and then -

Jack goes off:

“If I gotta put a plasma pulse in your fucking chest to stop your train wreck, then I goddamn will. You wanna see me fight?”

“Don’t fucking worry, Gabe -”

[Tactical Visor: ACTIVATED]

Diamond reticles target all the pale and brightly-colored skulls in his view.

“I’ve got you in my sights.”

Jack’s already pulling the trigger.

By Reaper, one of the Los Muertos members falls down, already dead and -

There’s a fraction of a second where Reaper looks up at the figure on the stairs, vision red upon red upon red, heavy pulse rifle flashing lightning bolt blues and in the dull, boring concrete alleys of his mind -

Backlit by the golden glow of liquid life -

The blue-gold stained glass figure shoots down living guns made of dust and ash -

His eyes are only blue, as blue as bottled nightfall, as blue as stardust sea, as blue as -

Jack’s soul pulses blue white gold white blue -
Reaper fucking chokes -

Before he dissolves into smoke, fleeing down around the corner of the bell tower, just below the arch of the pedestrian bridge where -

(“Up there,” Sombra seethes. She’s clutching an arm weakly, her neon green paint smeared from all the shoves Jack has thrown at her, but she gestures with her head up to a narrow opening by the eastern end of the second story pedestrian bridge. The hacker heaves, “We can cut him off -”)

76 sees only flashes of fear on their faces, lit briefly by blue plasma lightning strikes, before the brightly-colored deaths scream and shriek and fall - he’s dropped one-two-three -

(“He’s auto-targeting us,” Reaper growls as the screams of brightly-colored deaths fill the air. The mercenary reforms, snapping, “I don’t fucking know how he’s doing it, but he’s got a pattern for us -”)

When there’s a quick break in the shouting, the soldier rushes up the rest of the stairs, darting to his right, up and around onto the pedestrian bridge, squaring up against the open arch, weighted with starlight strands and tarnished, burnished bells and flickering, faltering candles and -

The air here feels lighter -

(“If we move fast, I can stop him,” Sombra states darkly, hefting another translocator in her hand. Reaper watches her for only a moment before he murmurs, “When you’ve disabled his gear, I’ll move in. Understood?”)

It carries the sharp, salty tang of the sea -

And the smell of pulse munitions.

He dumps the empty pulse stock, putting a new one into the slot and -

76 is already pulling the trigger on the remaining Los Muertos members in the Mercado plaza -

(“...Entiendo,” she mutters, before hurling the translocator into the gap, and snaps her fingers, dematerializing-rematerializing instantly, as Reaper shadowsteps in beside her.)

(Sombra cloaks -)

(She darts out onto the archway -)

He’s warring death with death, destruction with destruction, red upon red upon neon glo-paints when -

Pink -

He’s snapping his head as the color flickers -

Orange -

FUCK -

Pink -

He’s twisting to his right but -
Purple.

He gets a glimpse of her fierce green grin -

Before the tactical visor sputters and flickers and fades.

Fuck, fucking shit! 76 is snarling to himself as the clarity of his vision goes down - he can still see, but not nearly as well and -

Under the pale blue moonbeams -

He sees the obsidian wraith rise -

Gabriel launches himself at Jack.

Jack attempts to step back, attempts to get some distance, raises his heavy pulse rifle to swing at him, but Gabriel blasts a shotgun straight at it, the recoil knocking it back against Jack’s chest, and the mercenary pins the gun down, locking it in place with the butt of his right shotgun, before slamming the left shotgun into the side of Jack’s head -

Pain floods through his skull as the rumble aches and swells and ribbons through him like violence, like lightning, and Jack is struggling to get his bearings when he feels it -

The immense
dense
weighted
pressure

cracking against the right side of his screenglass

as silver-tipped claws dig into the frozen liquid and the matted plastic of the mask on the right side of his face and -

“Gabriel -” he’s snarling, gasping, pleading, but

it’s too late.

Through the half-brightly-colored shadows, half-blue nightfall darkness, half-tarnished, burnished lighting, he sees the pale skull, lit with eyes of the glow of embers of hell and high water, fire and flood in the orbital openings, and he sees the black-silver hand squeeze squeeze squeeze squeeze -

As if it were around his throat instead -

The tactical visor is warning warning warning, system failing warning, and -

In a fraction of a second -

He has squeezed his eyes shut -

Out of instinct and old habits and reflexes.

He feels it break.

[If it’s fragile and it shatters - ]
The screenglass buckles and pressures and weighs, it snaps and cracks, shards exploding, pieces fragmenting into his skin, old broken useless ugly, but also up, out, into the padded palm of a silver-tipped hand, and Gabriel recoils slightly, hissing as the shards of red upon red upon red sliver themselves into his hand, and in the moment he’s released his grip -

Jack is already moving.

He’s hurling back at Gabriel, swinging the heavy pulse rifle half-blindly, knocking the mercenary aside, semi-stumbling backwards and -

He’s falling.

For a single, almost imperceptible moment -

Time seems to slow.

There are only the white-gold moonbeams, the frozen stardust raindrops, the blue nightfall of sea-drenched midnight, the tarnished, burnished bronze of threaded bell lights, the faltering, weakening flames of candles -

Eyes of red upon red upon red, eyes of hell and high water, fire and flood, looking out through a pale mask of cracked bone -

Meeting the red upon red upon -

Blue.

Gabriel stops.

From beneath red upon red upon broken glass, surrounded by drips and flakes of blood, as if by some strange luck, unbroken, undamaged, unharmed -

There is a blue eye looking back at him:

A shimmer of bottled stained glass he could not shattered

A shimmer of blue dusky nightfall, dark and swollen with the abyss of the eastern sea

A shimmer of a soul, blue white gold white blue blue blue -

…Jack.

[If it’s fragile and it shatters -]

[Let it matter, oh, it matters.]

The soldier slams into the pavement hard, his heavy pulse rifle landing beside him.

There’s a shriek to his right and -

He’s already trying to lift himself up, to rise to his feet, feeling his whole back ache and shudder, feeling several ribs snap and shift slightly but -

His somehow miraculously undamaged right eye flicks to the small figure stumbling backwards
beneath several yellow ground-level arches, and the girl’s eyes grow wide as -

“It’s you,” Alejandra whisper-hisses at him and suddenly -

He’s on his feet, bolting to her, dragging the heavy pulse rifle under an arm as he dives into the cover of the ground-level arches, beneath the patio that the pedestrian bridge leads to. His soul catches in his lungs, his breath heaves heaves struggles, and Alejandra darts away slightly as he slumps, flags, slows a little under the shelter -

“Run -” he’s gasping to her, but -

A fierce, determined look takes hold of her features and -

Alejandra grabs his hand.

“Esta via,” she’s snapping, half-tugging, half-failing to pull him with her, but 76 immediately follows her lead, stumbling along before his legs catch up with himself, and suddenly they’re bursting out of the eastern end of the ground-level arched hallway into a moonlit back courtyard, surrounded by apartments and buildings and -

He thinks he can hear Gabriel’s heavy footfall behind them -

Alejandra is darting forward, across the courtyard, towards the sheer cliff down to the sea, but he follows her, running after her, as they skid around a right to a familiar orange-red building above the sea -

“In here,” she’s gasping, heaving, as she hauls the green door to the bakery open and 76 dives in, scrambling to a crouch, ducking beneath the right window as the girl drags the door shut just -

“ALEJANDRA, qué chingados -”

A light bursts on in the second-story hallway but the girl rushes, leaping over the store counter to dart to the stairs, hissing, “Mamá, tranquilo!”

76 can hear Silvia’s voice start to say something but it immediately stops when -

“Where the fuck did he go?”

Gabriel’s voice is directly outside -

Directly outside the window.

The entire bakery falls into a deathly quiet.

76 thinks that the ships in the water can probably hear his ragged, loud breathing -

“...Perhaps he jumped?” Sombra’s voice cuts in, though much softer and more contemplative than Gabriel’s. The mercenary snarls, “No fucking way would he jump -”

“Well, it’s that, or he’s hiding out in a corner and we missed him,” the hacker states bluntly, and the mercenary snaps, “He must’ve gone through the Mission.”

“Impossible,” Sombra mutters, “They wouldn’t have let him in. Not with the gun.”

“...Let’s go back,” Gabriel decides, but 76 hears the slow roll of hesitation in his voice, “We can sweep the beach in a moment.”
There’s the sound of heavy footfall and the lighter squeak of running shoes on concrete and -

Once they’ve faded, 76 hurls himself to his feet, running to the bakery counter and hauling himself over, chanting, “Shitshitshitshit -”

He’s starting to move to the stairs when -

“Get the hell out of my house!”

Silvia is standing at the top of the stairs, pointing an old Crisis rifle at him. He freezes, but Alejandra moves away from the wall, standing in between them, yelling, “Mamá, stop!”

“Get away from him, Alejandra -”

“Mamá, this is the man who saved me!”

...So the rumors are right,” the baker whispers hoarsely and beneath the remaining parts of the mask, 76 pleads, “Please, por favor, Silvia - please let me use the sink to get the glass out - I’ll leave, I’ll never come back -”

“...Second door on the left,” she states coldly, before lowering the rifle and moving out of the way. 76 sighs, gasping, “Gracias, muchas gracias, seriously I -”

“Hurry up. Alejandra, get the medical kit,” Silvia tells them both. Soldado and soldaderita both leap to attention, before he continues up the stairs and she rushes back down, towards the kitchen. 76 makes his way to the second door on the left, unlocking the rest of the mask as he enters the restroom, tossing the broken tactical visor to the floor and ripping his gloves off next. He undoes the connectors on his kevlar gloves-to-sleeves, tugging those off too before he dunks his hands under the sink and cranks the faucet. He scrubs down, switching the faucet off and pulling his own medkit from a side bag. He clicks the lid open and finds a packet of high-grade sanitizer and the tweezers. 76 coats his hands in the sanitizer, feeling it sting at the new skin he’s cracked open from the fight, but his enhanced endorphins dull the pain, and he immediately stares himself down in the mirror.

He looks like shit.

The whole right side of his face - where Gabriel had smacked him with a shotgun and then cracked the visor screenglass - is swelling up, the torn skin looking ragged and drip-drip-dripping red blood from the wounds. Part of his eye is bloodshot, where the hit had ruptured some of the vessels, and his cheek is already looking very bruised, raising an angry red across his sore cheekbone.

By the door, Silvia watches him - she’s still holding the rifle, but it’s upright in her arms, the safety on, though her gaze is sharper and fiercer than any bullet.

With shaky hands, he inhale-exhales -

And then pulls the first shard of glass from his face.

It stings like a motherfucker, and his shaking hands don’t help, but he drops it on the rim of the sink as blood drip-drip-drips out of the opened wound but 76 -

He’s already working on the next one.
Sharp, furious strikes of pain needle and wind through the side of his head as he works, but he only focuses on drawing the pieces out of his ripped, shredded skin, but Silvia’s voice breaks his tensions:

“...My brother Hector always speaks so highly of you.”

76 stops, his gaze in the mirror moving to meet the baker’s as Alejandra appears, grinning wide as her braids bounce with each eager step. Silvia never looks away, even as 76 asks quietly, as calmly as he can, “...How is he?”

“...Well. He is doing well. He works for the comisionado in Alto Lucero,” she replies as Alejandra moves into the bathroom, setting the second medical kit on the edge of the counter. The girl grins up at him, asking eagerly, “You know Tío Hector?”

“I fought with him in La Batalla Setenta y Dos,” 76 says, looking back at his reflection and wincing as his steadier hands pull out another shard. Silvia’s gaze never leaves his face, and she asks her daughter stiffly, “...Do you know who this is, mija?”

“Uh, Soldier: 76? It’s on his jacket, Mamá,” Alejandra answers with a smirk which gets her mother to roll her eyes but also finally crack a smile and 76 chuckles lightly as well, tweezing another piece above his eyebrow and fuck, that one really fucking hurt - feels like it scrapes the bone underneath -

“That’s just the name the American news media gave me,” he answers, pulling the last piece from his forehead - the right half of his face is a bloody mess now, the liquid of life flowing down the side of his face from broken veins and cracked skin. He turns the faucet on, bending over to half-dunk, half-splash the water on his face and shit, it stings and burns in the deeper wounds like hell and high water in his body. Distantly, he hears Silvia tell Alejandra to “get a spare towel,” and he hears the girl patter off.

When he lifts his head again, face half-drenched in water with small smears of blood starting to pool like ink drops, Alejandra is back, offering up a floral patterned hand towel. The soldier stares at it for a moment before saying softly, “...I’ll get you another one.”

“...No te preocupes,” Silvia states back as their gazes meet. The baker then smiles faintly, saying, “But our floor supply is low again - perhaps you can help Alejandra buy more than one bag this time -”

“Mamá!” Alejandra snaps but her mother rolls her eyes, saying fondly, “Mija, mira, he can carry more than one -”

“You’re embarrassing me, Mamá!”

“That’s what parents are supposed to do to their children,” 76 grins, taking the towel from her hands and patting his face with it. When he pulls it away, it is smeared with watery blood but -

He turns to rifle through his medkit, finding the small spray bottle of biotic nanobots and the second bottle of bio-protein sealant. He shuts his right eye, spraying the nanobots first as their soft, golden aura fills the air around his head with tarnished, burnished healing. He can already feel the sting slowing, the blood coagulating - even his bruises ache a little less. With that done, he swaps it out for the bio-protein sealant, the bottle hissing as it covers his cut wounds -

“You have children?” Silvia asks with some confusion and he chuckles again, saying dryly as he reopens his right eye, “Not biologically but by the blood of the covenant. Parents of all types are meant to embarrass their children.”

“I’m never going to embarrass my children,” Alejandra declares and both the baker and the soldier
laugh wryly at that, Silvia saying, “Oh, mija, I will embarrass your children for you.”

“You better not!”

“Then what’s even the point?” 76 asks and Silvia nods along appreciatively, adding, “Exacto. This is the joy of getting old, my daughter.”

Alejandra makes a skeptical face at that. Both adults laugh and -

76 feels his right ribs slide slightly with that and Jesus fucking Christ, it hurts it hurts it hurts -

“Oh wow!” Alejandra says, peering at the capsule on the counter. Silvia asks quietly, “That is a biotic field, yes?”

“Yes. Lifesavers during the Crisis. Well… lifesavers even now, huh?” 76 says back, but clearly she’s not impressed - she gives him a deadpan expression which knocks the smile off his face.

“Los Muertos has some of these!” Alejandra says, grinning at him, “I’ve seen them using it -”

“Ah, yes, Alejandra, mija -”

Silvia’s voice has an iciness to it that causes both soldado and soldaderita to freeze.

“What exactly were you doing outside at midnight in the middle of a battle?” the baker asks her daughter harshly, and Alejandra gives her a chagrined look, muttering, “It’s summer break, Mamá - there’s no school -”

“That is not what I am asking,” Silvia snaps at her as 76 chortles over the answer. Alejandra pouts slightly as the baker intones, “After everything I said the other day!”

“...I wanted to help…” the girl says softly, poking at the biotic field as the glow begins to fade. She scowls fiercely, her eyes filling with determination as she states boldly, “The soldier helped me, so I wanted to help -”

“That was incredibly dangerous -” Silvia starts to say when -

“Jack.”

Both mother and daughter stop.

They stare at him.

Jack coughs slightly on his own blood and the ash in his lungs, saying again, “Me llamo Jack. And your daughter is very brave, Silvia. But that was -” he adds, tilting a darkened dad-scowl at Alejandra, who pouts again. Jack is undaunted, unfazed by the look, saying sternly, “That was very dangerous.”

“...Los Muertos is dangerous,” Alejandra fires back and Silvia snorts, saying sharply, “This is why you should stay inside!”
“Your mother is right. I appreciate your help, Alejandra, but I am not worth risking your well-being over. Or worth getting grounded for,” Jack adds with a low chuckle and her eyes grow wide and shocked with that -

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Silvia says contemplatively, and Alejandra whips around, pleading, “But Mamá -!”

“You’re both grounded.”

“...What,” Jack states as Alejandra protests, “That’s not fair! I did the right thing! You always tell me to do the right thing!” The baker is undaunted, unfazed, stating with finality, “Tomorrow, you both help with the chores. We need more flour, eggs, and sugar! Do you know how to bake?” she asks to Jack, who stammers, “Uh, not… very well, but I mean -”

“It is never too late to learn,” Silvia says with a vicious, wicked grin and Jack mutters with bewilderment, “Uh… Thank you?”

“De nada.”

“This is such bullshit,” Alejandra grumbles and both Silvia and Jack whip towards her, Silvia snapping, “WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?” as Jack growls, “Don’t swear!”

“I did the right thing!” Alejandra protests again and this time, Jack explains sternly, “Mira, amiga - the ends don’t justify the means. Doing the right thing the wrong way will still have consequences.”

Silvia gives him a fierce, unimpressed glower and Jack -

He knows.

He knows all too well.

Jack sighs:

“...I learned this the hard way.”

-------

Segador: 73

Saturday, July 10, 2076: 01:03 a.m. - on the beach of Dorado, Mexico

This isn’t exactly what he had in mind for spending time on a Gulf Coast beach.

With the firefight, the beach is empty save for a few remaining Los Muertos members combing the cliff rocks, searching to see if the soldier had jumped down here. They are guided only by whitegold moonbeams and sea-drenched reflections of starlight, and the bright colors of their glo-paints, flicking flashlights over stones and boulders.

Reaper knows.

He knows they will find nothing.

He knows Jack did not jump.
He does not know how he pulled that little vanishing act, but he does know that it is exactly like Jack to have fucking magicked himself out of a goddamn battle.

He stares at the sea, thinking long and dark and full of shadows, as the light footsteps patter closer, causing the sand to shift and hiss. He growls at her, “...Well?”

“Nothing,” Sombra replies, coming to a stop on his right, her face green and whitegold. She sighs, “...You were right. He is not here.”

“Call off the search,” Reaper states, never looking away from the reflection of the moon on the water, even as he adds, “This is worthless and a waste of our time. We need to regroup at your base and assess the damages.”

“We chased him off -” Sombra starts but Reaper snaps, “And you fucking lost the battle. I only got a rough estimate, but I’m guessing another twelve of your little anarchy gang are dead or badly wounded.”

“And whose fault is that?” Sombra demands, turning towards him, which finally gets Reaper to face her, glaring down at the small hacker as he growls, “I stuck to my part of the plan - I predicted everything short of that stupid fucking Justice building, but it would’ve been easy to correct if your fucking 'squad leader' had not disobeyed my instructions and told his members to cluster up like sitting ducks. I said that the soldier has limited fucking visibility like all humans do, but the only person to ever flank him properly was you.”

The emotions of anger and a strange sort of pride war on Sombra’s face and Reaper just sighs darkly, “We needed more people positioned on rooftops and in corners, not out in the fucking streets like morons. This is why y’all needed a fucking sniper and not my useless ass.”

“...We would never have found him without you,” Sombra says to him quietly and -

*I just know how he thinks.*

“...You’re the one who told us to get information from the comisionado and the LumériCo guards,” Sombra reminds him, and Reaper just huffs, “That should’ve been the first thing you would’ve done anyways. Any other ex-ops would tell you that.”

“...You knew his every move.”

*I know them before he thinks them.*

Reaper stares fiercely at the sea, even as the whitegold moonlight and the pale green paint seems to make her dark eyes glow -

The brightly-colored death whispers:

“...Why are you fighting him, Gabriel?”

There is already a shotgun pressed to the side of her shaved head.

Even as her biopanels flicker orange-red in fear, Sombra’s gaze -

Her look is not one of fear

Nor anger

Nor confusion
But one of raw, unedged sorrow.

He assesses her coldly, weighing the value of her soul as she continues to defy him -

To break and shatter his expectations.

The woman cloaked in brightly-colored shadows says sadly, so sadly, so mournfully, “That is what he called you.”

“...Gabriel Reyes is dead,” he seethes, even as the voice whispers, whispers:

*Is he?*

*Then who are you?*

“And so is Jack Morrison,” Sombra retorts, snarking, “All I fought today is a sad, broken old soldier with a big bad gun and some sort of fucked up Cyclops mask.”

“A soldier who kicked our asses -”

“Sometimes, the hardest lesson to learn is loss,” Sombra states, but she sneers, glancing slightly over her shoulder at the other Los Muertos members on the beach, muttering tartly, “Maybe David has finally learned his lesson.”

*And you? the voice whispers, whispers, What did you learn today?*

What did he learn?

That the soldier is sad, broken, and *bitter* -

That the reaper’s fury is all-encompassing, that he feels raw, unedged fusion melting, melting, melting such conflicting emotions into one that is all-compassing -

That the soldier is plasma pulses, blue bottled lightning strikes and the wrath of a hurricane -

That the reaper’s sunsoul aches and hurts and burns -

…That the soldier still kicks ass when he’s determined.

(Something indescribable rises in the melting melting melting fusion core of his sunsoul and Reaper -)

That the soldier will still *fight* -

(It is a feeling he has not felt in *years.*)

That beneath the red upon red upon red -

(The burning, angry, raging, molten *joy* -)

There is still blue.

(The stained glass fragments of his memories pale in comparison to the vividness of -)

There is still something worth *fighting*.

“...So are you gonna shoot me or…?” Sombra asks dryly and Reaper sighs, grumbling as he pulls the
gun away from her head, “You hardly seemed surprised.”

“No me das miedo,” she chuckles at him darkly and as the shotgun fades into curls of smoke from his hand, Reaper rolls his shoulders, lolling his head as he mutters, “Don’t you know you’re supposed to be scared of ghosts and monsters?”

“So I’ve heard,” Sombra murmurs contemplatively, “But well - I spend a lot of my time around the dead anyways.”

“Cute,” Reaper replies pithily, “How long have you been waiting to use that one?”

“Hmm, about a lifetime?” Sombra cracks and Reaper groans, “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“I was dying to use it,” she adds and the mercenary growls, “Don’t make me get the gun again.”

“Just try me, Gabe,” she snorts before adding knowingly, “You don’t mind if I call you ‘Gabe,’ do you?”

“Please, for the love of all that is holy, fucking do not -” he starts to growl but she just prattles on, “I could call you ‘Gabrielito’ instead -”

Reaper fucking chokes -

Stained glass, stardust memories fill his lungs and -

(Twenty-nine years, four days, seventy-two hours, far too many minutes, far too few seconds -)

“My name is John, but I hate it, so please call me Jack - but it’s sir to you, Gabe.”

“- Or Gabo, I mean, really, there are so many options here,” Sombra continues cheerfully and his -

His shredded, torn vocal chords - choking on shards of glass and stars - growls out, taunts, pleads, “Just fucking - just fucking stick to Reaper or whatever -”

“Alright, alright, whatever you say, señor segador,” Sombra sighs, rolling her eyes, but she’s giving him a mischievous grin that’s as wide as the ocean and as bright as the sun and -

“Cut that shit out,” he snaps at her but she just laughs loud and bold, undaunted and unfazed, “Don’t hurt yourself on all that edge, Gabe!”

“What did I literally just say?” he’s demanding but she’s darting away from him, heading towards the stairs on the south end of the beach, several Los Muertos members looking at her with dark, bitter glares and Reaper -

He knows.

He knows those looks.

The quiet judgment of those who do not understand how one can laugh after such a broken, bitter battle, how someone can deal a blow against death with death, how someone can find the light in the seams and cracks of the black obsidian shards -

How they can look up at the sunlight from beneath the blue waters of the cenote.

He saw those glares in the shadows of Watchpoints for years, he suffered their weight with his own fierce determination -
And when he would crack beneath the pressure of their whispers and shadows, he would let the smile of the one with blue in his eyes, sunshine in his hair put his fractured, weighted pieces back together and -

Reaper slows his pursuit of her and for a brief, almost imperceptible moment -

There’s a flash of fear on their faces as they see the red upon red upon hellfire gaze burn at them through the darkness of the pale skull mask.

“...Whatever you’re thinking,” the pale whitegold-silverblack commander of dealing destruction to destruction, death to death, whispers to them under the blue nightfall, “You better fucking kill those thoughts.”

“...We’re not -” David starts, but his pink skull jolts back in fear as Reaper swoops in close, snarling at him, “She is the only one to have any fucking common sense and perceptiveness in this little rebellion of yours, so I hope you learned a hard fucking lesson today, ‘leader,’ and start to listen to her a little better. She might be a little sharp around the edges, but your fucking team was fucking broken today, so either learn from her or let her fucking live.”

David’s breath is ragged and loud.

The sound grates on his senses.

“...You will tell Talon that this mission was a success,” Reaper snaps at him, “You will tell them that we drove off the vigilante. You will tell them you lost some members but that these deaths were inevitable - his gear and abilities far outweighed us all. You will tell them that we lost the battle but won the war -”

“How can you be so sure? How can you know he won’t come back?” David demands back and Reaper just -

The stained glass, stardust memories in his lungs cut and shred and burn.

“Because I know him well,” Reaper states darkly, before adding:

“And I know he has learned a hard lesson today too.”

-------

If it matters, let it matter
If your heart's breaking let it ache
Catch those pieces as they scatter
Know your hurt is not in vain

Don't hide yourself from the horror
Oh, hurt today, here tomorrow
If it's fragile and it shatters
Let it matter, let it matter

If it's fragile and it shatters
Let it matter, oh, it matters

Chapter End Notes

Quoth the Raven

"Nevermore."

---

...I dislike it when stories neatly resolve their truly traumatic issues in such a short timespan. It's only been like two weeks since they encountered each other on Route 66 - there hasn't been a moment to talk, a moment to...even fight about what happened to them.

Falling out is horrifically hard.

Fixing things is even harder.

Resolution is going to be bitterly, brokenly hard to do - to put the shattered pieces back together, one at a time, cutting themselves on the edges of the glass and bone.

"The best way over is through."

---

Alright so, my beta and I tried something a little different with this chapter. I hope the screenshots helped. AO3 gets...a little weird about pictures, so if anything looks super off, let me know.

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Next week: In the aftermath of the first Battle of Dorado, a commander and his captain talk about their priorities, promises, and paradigms, as they decide what they are together.
Chapter Summary

[Amanecer -Sunrise]

In the aftermath of the Battle of Seventy-Two Hours, and as the end of the Crisis draws near, Gabriel and Jack have much to discuss - about each other

And their futures together.

[Los dos a solas - the two alone]

Chapter Notes

_;_; thank you all for the wonderful messages! I'm glad so many people enjoyed the insanity of the last chapter.

We're nearing the end of our roller coaster now, and I just want to thank everyone who has been enjoying the ride. At the moment, the sequel is...kinda taking me some time and a whole lot of effort. I've had to rearrange my internal plot and timeline of events like four times due to things like the Orisa release, the Doomfist reveal, and the Masquerade comic. The good news is that everything should be stable, and the end result of the series "And Overwatch For All" didn't change - I mainly just readjusted the series of events to flow better. Now that I've got my mind settled, it'll be easier to get the ball rolling again.

This chapter is a nice, easy breather after the last one.

---

Song is "I Found" by Amber Run (Youtube link)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense then you'll lose your mind
And I'll use you as a focal point
So I don't lose sight of what I want
And I've moved further than I thought I could
But I missed you more than I thought I would
And I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense then you'll lose your mind

--------

Soldado: Anocheer

Sunday, July 9, 2050: 1714 (05:14 p.m.) - Entering central Dorado, just southwest of the Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant, Mexico

The air here feels lighter.

It carries the sharp salty tang of the sea, but it is mingled with the lingering scent of smoke - flavors of wood and dust and metal and ash - and a crushing weight of exhaustion and a hollow bitterness.

The air here feels lighter.

But not by much.

Jack half-dozes, half-winces himself into a waking dream - painted at the edges with the brightly-colored darkness of vivid, drip-drip-dripping red and weighted green nightmares - on the hover carrier, half-sitting, half-leaning on some of the remaining supply crates. He’s on the left, one leg slung over the side, his semi-injured right leg lying straight on the hover carrier, cradling his heavy pulse rifle (pulse stock empty, safety on) in his lap. Beside him, Torbjörn snores softly, the heaviness of sleep overwhelming the adrenaline and overrun battlelust that plagued him, his head resting slightly against Jack’s right arm. Every now and then, something in the engineer’s shifting dreams must wake him, because he’ll jolt upright, eyes wide in fear and horror, before realizing they’ve moved all of three meters and slumping back over with a pained grunt. On the far right, Ana leans against Torbjörn, curled around her sniper rifle (safety on), balled up like a cat struggling to maintain its warmth. Jack knows she sleeps for at least a few minutes at a time - her breathing, normally so still and controlled, will fall into a deeper, more even rhythm, heavy and slow, her head dipping against Torbjörn’s slightly, beret and dark hair hiding her face.

But every few minutes, her head lifts slightly, turns slightly, peers slightly at Torbjörn and Jack on the hover carrier, peers slightly at Gabriel and Reinhardt walking on their sides, and then dips again slightly. Ever so slightly.

When they had gunned down the last squadron of Bastions and the communications with the different platoons had confirmed the all-clear, Jack had insisted Gabriel take a spot on the hover carrier.

But Gabriel had given him a deadpan expression, which had been enough to convince Jack to park his ass on the hover carrier and struggle with weighted sleeplessness.

Finding one of the Brigadas on the opposite side of the Omnic siege line had changed everything -

And in minutes -

Not days, not hours -

Minutes -
The remaining Omnic forces had been routed. Meeting up with Portero and his central troops had been an ordeal and a half on its own. Guillermo was cut from the same cloth as Reinhardt and Gabriel - massive and broad, singular in entity. Jack estimated his height to be just under two meters, a little bit taller than Gabriel and himself. Portero was thick eyebrows and thick mustache and thick bones and thick muscles, yet his dark eyes were sharp and clear and focused. He carried pulse cannons and rocket launchers with ease, and despite the crucial significance of his position to the Mexican armed forces, he took to the frontlines himself, ruining Bastion squadrons with blasts of his pulse cannon with fearless strength. The Strike Team had met the newest national hero of Mexico a few times over the years of the Crisis, but Portero’s Gulf State troops had been so focused on protecting Laguna Verde and steadily returning power westward from the eastern coast that the opportunity to strike at the Mexico State Omnium had never really presented itself.

Until the last month or so, when Portero had finally managed to resecure Mexico City and help stabilize the fractured Mexican Federal Government.

Gabriel had set out designing plans and building strategies to take down Quetzalcoatl and his Omnium armies as soon as they heard the news.

They had been en route to Mexico City to meet with Portero and finalize tactics when the emergency broadcast from Dorado had reached their transport ship.

It has been seventy-two hours, twenty-eight minutes, and forty-one seconds since Overwatch received the signal of a massacre on the edges of the painted city of lights.

It has been seventy-two hours, fourteen minutes, and eighteen seconds since Overwatch arrived in the painted city of lights.

Even though the battle has been officially over for an hour and three minutes and twelve seconds -

The war weighs on him

In sunfall clouds of screams and sparking gunfire, in blood drip-drip-dripping from strange moss and fern leaves, in bodies lying next to hover carriers, in empty biotic field vials and empty pulse stocks, in the scream of a rocket-hammer and the bang of a sniper rifle and the clack-clack-clack of automated turrets and -

the scent of exploding shotgun pellets -

the feeling of Gabriel’s shredded skin and drip-drip-dripping blood on his fingertips -

the feeling of his own shredded skin and drip-drip-dripping blood on his fingertips as he pulls deformed bullets from his own shoulder and thigh -

the empty hole in his chest where his heart should be -

the claws of his soul flaying and tearing and ripping the inside of his lungs and trachea and throat -

the weight of his priorities, walking to his left like he had not taken nine bullets to his body, cut from the cloth of warriors and kings, that stupid fucking beanie still sitting on his head like the ugliest, most sweat-drenched crown Jack has ever seen, light-dark eyes spun from gilded sundrops deep and submerged and heavy with contemplation and still, stagnant silence -

Jack can still feel Gabriel’s shredded skin and his drip-drip-dripping blood on his fingertips.
As if sensing his thoughts, Gabriel glances at him, eyes of red and gold and amber looking empty and hollow and lost -

Jack holds out his left hand.

They’re all of half a meter apart, maybe less.

Gabriel hasn’t left his side since the battle ended.

Gabriel has put away his right shotgun, clipped it to his back when the battle ended, but he still carries the left one, his fingers away from the trigger of course but -

Jack knows the safety is off.

Jack knows that the battle has ended -

But Gabriel’s war is never over.

But even so, Gabriel hasn’t left his side since the battle ended.

But even so -

Jack holds out his hand.

In a fraction of a second, Gabriel’s right hand is interlaced with his, fingers interlocking, and they are woven together.

The return to Dorado from the foothills of the Sierra de Chiconquiaco had not been a quiet stroll - the Brigada forces and the rurales fighters had acted as all people do, even in moments when a battle weighs on them: some talked, some sang, some laughed, some cried, some cheered, some looked empty and vapid, some smoked cigarettes and cigars, some took pictures with friends, some walked in still, stagnant silence on the long march back to the town. At the crushed rubble outskirts of the town, where the surprise attack had hit the hardest, where the scent of smoke in all its flavors lingered the strongest, the supply runners and supporters and volunteers had started shunting the Mexican armed forces off to temporary hospitals and medic bays, handing out emergency blankets and water bottles, ration bars and even pieces of candy. At one point, the march had slowed significantly to receive bowls of piping hot soup and stew, filled with drip-drip-dripping chunks of meat and beans and sizzling spices - Jack had taken a bowl from Gabriel and passed it to Torbjörn, and then taken the next bowl and consumed it in under a minute.

The entire Strike Team ate theirs in under a minute.

The civilian volunteers had watched them in slight horror as Gabriel had somehow *chugged* the stew, and Jack had handed his bowl back before the next group could even receive theirs.

“*Coman* (tn: eat)!” one of the volunteers had said to them cheerfully, as she tried to hold out more bowls to them, “*Sé que todavía tienen hambre* (tn: I know you are still hungry).”

“...I could eat more,” Torbjörn started to say, until Ana smacked him lightly on the shoulder. Gabriel rolled his eyes over their antics as Reinhardt mumbled sheepishly, “I cannot speak Spanish -”

“*Gracias, pero estamos bien* (tn: thank you, but we are fine),” Gabriel told her, waving his hand, “*Debería darla para algunos* (tn: you should give it to someone else).”

And with that, the Strike Team had continued their march into the city.
There, out in the outskirts, it had been easy to see the clear devastation, the heartbreak, the all-too-human struggle to provide small comforts and nourishment to others - to soldiers, to fighters, to defenders, to supporters, to suppliers, to volunteers, to the lost and the weary, to those who had sweat and bled and warred - but here, as they round another winding street corner to move to the city’s core, wrapped around the nuclear power plant like a vine, the destruction thins out, but the work continues.

More volunteers rush and move about, hauling supplies, taking tallies, providing small comforts and nourishments. Many of them are civilians from Dorado itself, operating under loosely organized guidance, but there are also -

There are also the volunteers in the bright blue UN uniforms.

They’re handing off supplies to other volunteers, setting up makeshift medical tents, organizing soldiers and supporters and the lost and the weary into queues for assistance and aid.

And in the center of them all -

Though she’s just slightly over a meter and a half tall -

Stands the maestra.

She has her back to them, her shoulders squared and set. This time, she lacks her characteristic brightly-colored textile dresses and her savvy high heels, yet she looks no less regal, no less powerful. Her field attire is the same sort of combat uniform Ana dons - padded body armor and long overcoat, the bold blue compliments her dark, rich skin well. Unlike his own wilted mop, her short, black, curling hair remains springy and delightful, radiant under the slowly-setting sun, shimmering with hues of orange and pink and purple. She’s snapping something to a group of her UN aides, pointing them to the south, and as the group rushes off, another aide taps her shoulder and points to the incoming Strike Team behind her.

Gabrielle Adawe turns towards them, eyes wide and lit with joy initially -

But her joy turns - slow and bittersweet - to a soft, aching tenderness.

Only now that he sees her, does Gabriel flick the safety on his left shotgun -

And he puts it away, clipping it to its twin on his lower back holster.

They are still woven together.

Jack nudges Torbjörn awake, and the engineer snorts slightly as he lifts his head, his eyes bleary and sluggish. The act of him moving startles Ana awake again, and the sniper finally stretches out as she takes in their calmer, stabilized surroundings. Reinhardt pats her lightly on the back and she leans softly into his hand, murmuring something quietly to him. Reinhardt nods before letting her go and bending down to flick the switch on the hover carrier. It slows to a stop as Gabrielle strides over to them -

Jack slings himself off the carrier, letting Gabriel pull him just a little, and placing a shifted weight on his still semi-healing leg.

He lets go of Gabriel’s hand -

Only to attach his pulse rifle to its slot on his back armor -
And then they are turning to her as she -

Without caring about the blood and sweat on their clothes, and being only about five feet tall, Gabrielle somehow has the sheer strength to pull both of the American supersoldiers in for a hug.

They have to crouch and bend slightly to hug her back but -

Neither of them complain.

Not for this small comfort, this momentary nourishment of the soul.

“You did a good job here,” she states gently, her Nigerian accent adding a light, pleasing, comforting lil to her words.

“...Thanks, Gabrielle,” Gabriel replies tensely, but there’s a soft, bittersweet weakness to his words and -

Jack once again takes his hand, threading his fingers between Gabriel’s and gripping them fiercely. After a fraction of a second, Gabriel’s fingers press back.

“Thank you for our supplies,” Jack says to Gabrielle, breathing with a soft relaxation. This comfort, this nourishment for his soul is small, but against the battle that still weighs on him -

Even the faintest touch helps him feel lighter.

Gabrielle releases them, stepping back to look them over, her eyes picking out the holes in their chestplates and the tears in their clothes, but she says nothing. They step aside as she turns to help Torbjörn slide off the hover carrier, before embracing him too. The engineer gives a loud and obvious sniffle, but mutters, “Yer supplies saved ma turrets out there. And o’ course, they kept us all alive.”

“We have almost exhausted the United Nations’ current biotic field supply,” Gabrielle informs them as she lets him go. Ana and Reinhardt round the front of the hover carrier, and Adawe gives them both similar hugs, although with Reinhardt’s size and bulky armor, it’s more like a sideways “wrap her arms around his torso and awkwardly pat at his back” thing, but the Crusader chokes loudly, two large tears leaking out of his eyes.

Gabrielle steps back, smiling sadly at them, “I am afraid that the demand for biotic fields is outpacing our ability to produce them, though the need for them is slowing drastically.”

“We’re gonna need a fuckton for when we tackle the Siberian Omnim,” Gabriel grumbles, “Mokosh is gonna fuck our shit up.”

“That will have to wait unfortunately - we will need time to recover the Overwatch stockpile before you attempt to tackle yet another God Program. I have brought what we have left for your preparations against Quetzalcoatl,” Gabrielle tells him, “Though based on the calculations you left me, I have distributed some of the excess to the volunteers here.”

Gabriel gives a small, impatient huff, but Jack elbows him for his ingratitude.

The commander squirms slightly, muttering, “I’m not… That sounded really rude, huh?”

“Yup,” Ana states blandly, making her typical “why are you two such idiots” pout from behind Gabrielle. Reinhardt gestures boldly, saying at a rather loud volume, “Zhese people need our help, Gabriel!”
“We also need those supplies -” Gabriel starts to say, until Jack glares at him thunderously. The commander shuts his mouth, looking properly shamed and a little perplexed before he sighs, “...Sorry. Just...hard for me to switch that mindset off.”

“It is fine, son,” Gabrielle says kindly, “That is why you are here - you focus on the battle, I will focus on the rest. But do remember, Gabriel - we are here for the people above all yes. Your pragmatism works on the battlefield, but may not always work in matters of the human spirit. All I ask is that you do keep in mind to keep that pragmatism limited, yes?”

“It gets him in way more trouble than he’ll ever admit,” Jack jokes wryly and Gabriel just gives him that wonderful scowl, snapping, “Excuse you - that pragmatism has saved your ass more times than I can count.”

“Balanced out by me saving your ass for all the times it got you in trouble,” Jack retorts and Gabriel glares, but nods slowly, saying, “Yeah, valid.”

“Perdón.”

The deep voice rumbles out from behind them, and the two supersoldiers break apart to whip around to the massive man who somehow manages to tower over the two of them.

“Apologies for interrupting,” Portero states in his rough, low tones, “But I believe introductions are in order.”

Jack scowls briefly at that. He respected Portero for everything the hero had done, but something about his mannerisms made Jack...a little uncomfortable - a small discomfort, a small malnourishment.

Beside him, Gabriel makes a blatantly skeptical face and if Jack wasn’t in the immediate presence of someone who seemed to still and silence the very air around him, the soldier would slap a hand to his forehead over Gabriel’s unsubtle ass.

“...A man such as yourself needs no introduction,” Gabrielle says brightly, but Jack notes the deftness with which she tempered her Strike Team commander, gently yet forcefully pushing herself between the two Americans to approach the Mexican general. For a fraction of a second, Jack sees how her right hand pats Gabriel’s arm just comfortingly enough to make him still - and then she’s swinging that same hand forward, extending it to Portero with a cheerful smile, “Gabrielle Adawe, Under-Secretary-General of the Security Council and overseer of the Overwatch Strike Team. Although at the moment, I am merely the one in charge of distributing United Nations’ aid.”

Portero assesses her small but confident pose, before taking her offered hand in his, shaking it slowly, saying coolly, “Encantado, Madam Secretary. I am General de Brigada Guillermo Portero, commander of the Fifth Military Zone. I have been running this operation in Dorado since the Crisis began, but of course the pinche Omnis would attack the moment I left for Mexico City.”

“Well then, I hope you do not mind that my team and I stepped in while you were out,” Gabrielle states with raw sunshine in her voice, “From the reports I managed to receive from Gabriel and Torbjörn, things were in dire need of Overwatch’s assistance here, especially in the beginning.”

“...That doesn’t even begin to cover - AH,” Gabriel yelps as Jack snaps his “don’t ruin this for her, Gabriel” right elbow into his commander’s side.

“From what the rurales platoons tell me, your team was crucial in halting the surprise attack and
pushing the Omnic frontline back to the mountains,” Portero tells her, before glancing over the Strike Team with a critical eye, “It is...impressive that these five were able to accomplish so much.”

“...We’ve been doing this for awhile,” Torbjörn states gruffly and Jack hears Ana mutter tartly, “Yeah, like four years now.”

“I have been doing this for five years now!” Reinhardt booms happily and Ana says slyly, “Well, if you’re gonna count pre-UN military time, Rein -”

“Our team excels in countering the unique tactics of Omnic forces,” Jack states a touch too loudly, to speak over them pointedly. Ana quiets as Jack levels his gaze to Portero’s calculating eyes, and the supersoldier says at a more even - yet still pointed - volume, “This is what we were made for - to disrupt and break the flow of war, and to protect those left defenseless before its path.”

Now it’s Gabriel’s turn to give him a fierce and pointed glare.

But even though the battle has ended -

_The war goes on in him._

“It must have been complicated to move _los batallones de la Quinto Zona Militar_ such a long distance from Veracruz to Mexico City,” Jack says with a low storm of emotions in his own deep voice, “Some would say that was quite the _gamble_, leaving the city open and vulnerable and defenseless - ”

Gabriel gets it.

Gabriel understands before anyone else in the small group does.

Gabriel _reacts_ before anyone else does.

In a fraction of a second -

Gabriel is physically standing between Jack and Portero, pressing a hand gently but firmly to Jack’s chestplate to push him back a half-step, as his commander snaps, “I don’t tolerate _insolence_ among my units, soldier.”

But Jack -

_Jack understands._

Because even though Gabriel’s eyes _burn_ with the passion of war, he’s got a wide, vivid, _burning grin_ on his face.

There is no _heat_ to his words, only to his gaze and his smile, radiant like the sun dipped in gold and -

Together, they understand.

And it is only now that the others understand as well.

Portero glares at him fiercely as Gabrielle gives him a sidelong, contemplative glance. Somewhere behind him, Ana titters lightly as Torbjörn huffs sharply. With surprising social grace and awareness, Reinhardt just laughs, “All battles are gambles, Jack! Zhat es why we fight!”

“Exactly, Morrison,” Gabriel states, but he’s still grinning like the _pinche pendejo_ he is, “You need some fresh air. Go cool your head.”
“...Lo siento, comandante (tn: I’m sorry, commander),” Jack sighs, looking past Gabriel to Portero’s stiff, sour face. The American soldier mutters darkly, “La batalla fue larga, y estoy muy cansado (tn: the battle was long, and I am very tired).”

Portero’s dark eyes never leave his, as the general intones, “Descanse, soldado (tn: rest, soldier).”

“...Gracias, señor,” Jack murmurs, before gently placing a hand over Gabriel’s on his chestplate and —

“Don’t go too far,” Gabriel says to him lowly, “They’re gonna want to talk strategy and I need you to help me get out of it.”

“...I’ll just be around the corner,” Jack says back quietly, “I just need a second.”

“I know. I’ll find you in a bit.”

Jack pulls Gabriel’s hand off his chestplate, and turns to his left, hopping back on the hover carrier before sliding off the other side and striding across the busy plaza. Soon, he can barely hear them as he is engulfed by the volunteers rushing around him. The streets of the Mercado plaza have largely been blocked off, permitting access only to hover carriers and pedestrians, and Jack finds that he isn’t really sure where he’s going, just that he’s following some strange flow pulling at him like an undercurrent —

And the salty, sharp tang of the sea.

Jack wanders to the side of a bright yellow building, steepled with a bell at the top of its tower, and he enters a small courtyard before following his senses and heading up the stairs on his left. The stairs take him to a second story patio, a pedestrian footbridge to the left, connecting the yellow belltower to another set of buildings across the street, and here —

Jack can finally see the water.

The air feels lighter.

He breathes - inhale-exhales, one-two -

And heads over to the far southern wall, his eyes never leaving how the slowly-setting sun dazzles on the surface of the sea, bleeding red and gold and amber, orange and pink and purple across the blue upon blue upon blue.

Jack leans awkwardly against the white wall of the building bounding the patio, before unclipping his pulse rifle. He sits and leans back at a slight angle, letting the pulse rifle rest in his hands, listening to the distant sounds of the people chatter and the soft, rolling wash of the sea —

He feels the sweet milk-honey radiance - painted red and gold and amber, orange and pink and purple, as brightly-colored as the city of lights, as brightly-colored as the warmth of that smile, lingering on the edges of his mind -

Gabriel’s skin is rich and warm in both tone and physical heat, yet the shredded skin beneath his shaking fingers twists up at awkward angles no matter how he seems to push at them. Gabriel’s blood - drip-drip-dripping - is royal and deep in both hue and vitality, yet it continues to coat his shaking fingers even as he presses at the shredded skin to get it to close - please close, please seal, please stop, please stop -

The blood flows-flows-flows and Gabriel shudders beneath him - dying, gasping -
Jack doesn’t realize he’s fallen asleep until the brightly-colored nightmare wakes him -

His eyes are already open.

He jerks his head forward, the colors of the real world swimming back into his sights and -

He’s not alone.

A small girl - surely no older than four or five - is peering out at him from behind one of the bright columns supporting the pedestrian footbridge.

When Jack focuses his gaze on her, she jumps back slightly, looking like she was caught doing something she shouldn’t, her long dark braid swinging wildly with the motion and Jack -

Jack smiles.

It is a tired, exhausted, drained smile, weighted by the battle still heavy inside him but -

“...Hola,” he says to her quietly, and she peeks back out, her dark, warm eyes almost violet in the soft glow of the sunset. Jack gives her that smile, murmuring sweetly, “Estás perdida, chiquitita (tn: are you lost, little girl)?”

She doesn’t say anything, just continues to stare at him with large, almost glowing eyes, assessing him -

Jack glances down at the heavy pulse rifle in his hands, the blood and sweat on his clothes, the bullet dents in his chestplate, and he grins sheepishly at her with a low chuckle, “Lo siento - me veo horrible (tn: I’m sorry – I look horrible).”

(He sees his limp figure sitting in the soft shadows of a patio in Dorado, blue eyes as vacant and as empty as the sky, and a small, twitching shudder runs through him before his eyes suddenly regain a little focus and he processes the small girl in front of him -

There’s blood covering his blue Overwatch uniform -)

He twists, leaning the heavy pulse rifle against the wall to his right, and shows her his open hands, smiling, “Una arma puede dar miedo, ¿sí? (tn: a weapon can be scary, yes?)”

“...No.”

Jack blinks at her in surprise as she steps out from behind the pillar. She’s dressed in a whimsical amount of purple - purple shirt, purple skirt, purple leggings, even purple tennis shoes, all slightly different shades. The color only seems to enhance the strange glow across her tan skin and deep eyes and -

Suddenly, she grins:

“No me das miedo (tn: You don’t scare me)!”

Jack opens his eyes in wide surprise, before huffing like a petulant child, “Bien, no me das miedo también (tn: fine, you don’t scare me either).”

This gets her to look at him in abject confusion.

Jack just folds his arms across his chest, muttering, “¿Sabes que lo dame miedo (tn: You know what scares me)?”
She continues to give him a bewildered look as she asks, “¿Qué?”

*Gabriel’s blood is regal and deep and flows-flows-flows -*

“...*Fantasmas* (tn: ghosts),” Jack states with sage finality and she -

She giggles.

“Tú eres raro (tn: you are weird)” she laughs brightly at him and Jack pouts, saying lightly, “No soy raro... bien, tal vez un poco (tn: I am not weird... well, sometimes a little).”

(“Are you afraid of ghosts, soldado?” Sombra chides him, not backing down, her eyes still uncanny in the strange light of his visor, and with everything glowing off of her, she looks...otherworldly, unnatural -

*Inhuman.*

Sombra cackles, “Me? I’m not afraid of ghosts. Shadows never fear the dark. When you know what I know, monsters can’t scare you anymore - not when there are bigger dangers out there.”)

As her giggles slow, Jack puts a flourishing hand over his chest, introducing himself, “Me llamo Jack. ¿Cómo te llamas (tn: I’m Jack, what’s your name)?”


“¿De quien (tn: from who)?”

“Las monjas (tn: the nuns).”

It takes Jack a second to remember the word - he hasn’t heard it in many years - before he fully processes the implications.

Oh.

“Ellas pueden dar miedo, sí (tn: they can be scary, yes),” Jack says quietly as she get close enough to kick lightly and curiously at his left foot. He doesn’t tell her to stop though, but instead murmurs, “Cuando era joven, mi reverendo también podía dar miedo (tn: when I was young, my reverend also scared me).”

“No tengo miedo de las monjas (tn: I do not fear the nuns)” Olivia states defiantly, and Jack chuckles, “Entonces eres más valiente que yo (tn: then you are braver than I).”

“Pero eres un soldado! ¿Cómo te puedes tener miedo de algo (tn: but you are a soldier – how can you be scared of anything)?” she asks him and he -

*Gabriel’s blood is regal and deep and flows-flows-flows -*

He smiles at her weakly, saying, “Porque fantasmas me dan miedo mucho (tn: because ghosts scare me a lot).”

She gives him a skeptical stare before rolling her eyes, muttering, “Raro.”

“...No me gusta tu insolencia (tn: I don’t like your insolence),” Jack mutters tartly which gets her to giggle again and -
“Jack!”

Gabriel’s voice carries across the streets and courtyard and brightly-colored buildings, across the sunset painting red and gold and amber, orange and pink and purple over everything.

Olivia jolts slightly at the sound, but Jack just chuckles, “Aquí hay otra cosa que te da miedo (tn: Here is something else to be scared of). Up here, Gabe!”

There’s the stomp-stomp-stomping of steps up the stairs and suddenly, Gabriel rounds out onto the patio, saying loudly, “Fucking finally, been looking all over for you - they’re gonna put us in a guestroom by the Mission -”

He dead stops at the other end of the patio when he sees Olivia.

She stares him down defiantly as Jack says casually, “Gabe, this is Olivia. Olivia, esto es Gabriel.”

Olivia and Gabriel never break eye-contact, even as she kicks at the heel of Jack’s boot again.

“All right, Jack - did you befriend another lost child?? You need to be stopped - your dad powers are out of fucking control,” Gabriel chuckles with his characteristic smirking scowl. A smug grin spreads on Jack’s face as Olivia giggles:

“Ooooh, you said ‘shit.’”

Both soldiers freeze.

“You can speak English??” Jack asks twisting to her wildly, followed immediately with, “WHO TAUGHT YOU THAT WORD.”

“Pedro,” she says casually as Gabriel groans, “Oh, my fucking god -”

“STOP SWEARING,” Jack shouts at him as he dives to cover her ears and Olivia is giggling loudly as she wiggles away, kicking at his heel again -

“No haga eso (tn: don’t do that)” Gabriel hisses at her as she dances away from Jack. As she runs closer to Gabriel, the commander flashes a bright, vibrant grin at her, pretending to look large and menacing (not that it is a particularly difficult task for him), curving his hands and splaying his fingers wide like claws and Jack chuckles.

“¡Huye! ¡Rápido (tn: run, fast)” Jack laughs as Olivia rushes past Gabriel -

And she fucking punches him in the thigh, where there is a gap in his padded ballistic armor.

Holy fucking shit.

“HOLY SHIT,” Gabriel shouts as his knee buckles slightly and Jack howls with laughter, echoed by Olivia cackling as she bolts down the pedestrian archway.

Gabriel straightens back up and glares at Jack, who is sobbing with laughter, collapsing on the brick of the patio as he wheezes, “I’m adopting her.”

“I fucking think not, asshole - that little punk,” Gabriel growls, “Next time I see her she’s getting a lecture on how to throw a fist.”

“Oh my god, you would try to teach her out to punch properly,” Jack gasps as he sits back up and Gabriel folds his arms, cocking his hips slightly as he huffs, “Of course I would. She’s got raw talent
but no skill. Talent means fuckall if you don’t channel it right.”

“You’re gonna make her into a monster,” Jack heaves, grinning up at Gabriel. His commander just smirks dryly, “I am what I am, Jack, and I can only teach what I know.”

Gabriel gives him a soft, sunset smile.

Jack basks in its warm glow for a fraction of a second.

And then Gabriel offers him a hand up.

Jack takes it, letting Gabriel pull him up.

He already feels lighter.

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And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me

And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me

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Segador: Amanecer

Monday, July 10, 2050: 5:42 a.m. - In a guestroom hosted by la Misión de las Campanas, Dorado, Mexico

Gabriel wakes to the 5 a.m. light.

It is a softly gilded glow, as if someone has mixed gold with white palladium and the slightest percentage of copper - it is swirls of amaranth and marigold, honey and rose, cream and lavender. Somehow, someone somewhere decided that their sweat-and-blood-drenched team, reeking of pulse munitions and shotgun smoke and something strangely surreal, like a sharp salt, deserved a room with two east-facing windows on the cliff above the Mission, looking out into the central courtyard, across cactus gardens and stone benches and brass bells hanging from white archways, out to the shimmering turquoise sea, dappled and jeweled under the sunlight. Last night, when they had trudged into the second story room, they’d all been too fucking tired to care about their view, throwing their shit onto the floor and rushing off to the dorm showers back on the first story. Before the Crisis had begun in full, the Misión de las Campanas was famed for its beautiful seaside scenery,
its serene music that could be heard on ships out in the Gulf, and for hosting pilgrims and guests who made the trek to visit the cloud and moist forests and engage in the city of lights.

Since the Crisis had begun, many of the Mission rooms had functioned as a makeshift barracks for the extra soldiers Portero had slowly recruited.

Even last night, a mere hour and half after the battle had ended, the dorm showers had been packed. As they stood in line behind several other soldiers and rurales fighters, Jack had wryly and stupidly joked that he and Gabriel should share a shower to save on time and space, but that had only made Ana turn to Reinhardt contemplatively before Gabriel had grunted, “He’s too big for you two to fit in one stall.”

“...Damn,” Ana had said, as Torbjörn had slumped his head in hands, groaning, “How am I the only one without my partner here?”

“You’d kill us if we brought Ingrid along,” Gabriel had pointed out and Torbjörn had nodded slowly at that, muttering, “...You’re damn right I would.”

Jack and Gabriel had NOT shared a shower stall.

They had, however, shared a bed.

They had also shared it with Torbjörn.

Ana and Reinhardt had crammed into the second bed.

When the volunteer organizers had told them they could take two rooms - or even more if they wanted - Gabriel had grunted, “Tiene dos camas (tn: it has two beds)?”

“Sí, pero -”

“Camas grandes (tn: big beds)?”

“Sí, PERO -”

“Entonces estamos bien (tn: then we are fine).”

The volunteer organizers had looked at him like he was insane.

They had then looked at Reinhardt with blatant skepticism.

Gabriel hadn’t blamed them for their confusion, but the Strike Team was used to drastically worse sleeping accommodations. Fucking hell, just having real beds - comfortable and clean with multiple pillows and blankets - was a fucking dream. No rock-paper-scissors to see who gets the pillow, the blanket, the mattress, the couch cushions, the floor. No debates on if it was better to maximize body counts on a bed - do you cram in as many people as possible and make them all sleep like shit - or if rotating out hours on the bed was a fairer method. No stiff hours of jamming himself next to or on top of or below Jack as the other three settled in around them.

And the distribution of placements had been about as logical as they could make them: Ana, the second smallest person in the group, sleeping with her partner Reinhardt, the largest person in the group, as the two “average” members of Jack and Gabe split space with Torbjörn, who frankly, took almost no room at all in the grand scheme of things.

Once they were cleaned up and back in the room, Jack had thrown himself in the bed closest to the
windows, and promptly passed the fuck out.

Torbjörn had snorted, pulled himself under the covers on the other side of the bed, and also promptly passed the fuck out.

Before Gabriel had even fully processed what was happening, Reinhardt had flopped into the second bed, and a second later, Ana had curled up in the space between his left arm and chest -

And with that, only the commander was left awake.

“...Good hustle out there, team” Gabriel had said dryly to their snores, “We played some really good d today, and everyone stuck to their routes. We played like a fucking team.”

And then he’d crawled in between the soldier-medic and the engineer, wrapped himself around Jack -

And woken up in this moment.

Gabriel wakes to 5 a.m. light - white-gilded, milk-honey radiance that streams in through thin curtains only partially shut, casting blush pink and rose gold and pastel yellow into the room, with just the faintest touch of seaglass blue at the edges and in the bright shadows, a small reflection of the water of the Gulf somehow reaching them. Though everything seems to exist in halfness - half-light and half-shadows, half-air and half-smoke, half-time and half-life, half-inhale and half-exhale, half-here and half-there - the air here is not weighted and dense like the forests’ atmosphere, but light, watery. It is fleeting, intangible -

Beyond reach.

At some point someone cracked open one of the windows, letting in a soft breeze - carrying the sharp, salty tang of the sea - and the light of the dawn into the room.

Still in his own halfness - half-asleep and half-awake, half-aware and half-dead - Gabriel shifts his head and sees Torbjörn’s back, rising and falling still with solid slumber.

Gabriel shifts his head to his right and sees an empty space.

...the fuck he’d go.

It’s a thought also of halfness - half-question, half-statement, half-disbelief.

Technically that’s thirds, but Gabriel doesn’t give a fuck.

With the slowness of a corpse, Gabriel sits upright and glances bleary-eyed around the room.

Reinhardt is sleeping on his side, facing towards them, and Gabriel spots a single tanned arm wrapped partially around his torso. There are several datapads on the side table in between the two beds and Gabriel doesn’t remember anyone putting those there but he doesn’t dwell on it. There are several socks, a t-shirt, one of his spare beanies, several pillows, and a mess of blankets on the floor by the couch that’s against the opposite wall and -

The blankets shift slightly.

Gabriel doesn’t question it.

He simply understands.
Grunting slightly, he crawls out from under the sheets and back across the bed, before standing on the carpeted floor and shuffling over to the wadded cocoon-nest on the ground.

He nudges it with a toe.

“Nnnngh,” the blanket pile responds as a head of gold-blonde appears briefly, before rewrapping the blanket tightly around a neck and shoulders. Gabriel kneels and pushes some of the extra pillows around, making some space, tugging at the blanket with increasing insistence -

“Noooo…” Jack’s sleep-addled voice rumbles and Gabriel mumbles back, “It’s me, asshole, let me have some.”

“...Mmmkay,” is the response he gets as the tightness of the sheets slackens, giving Gabriel enough room to wiggle himself under.

No sooner is he lying down flat, head and recovering shoulder on a pillow, his feet propped up on some more pillows (how the fuck did Jack find this many pillows), his back and ass angled into the stiff floor -

And then Jack is on him.

The soldier-medic nestles himself against Gabriel’s left side, and Gabriel shifts his arm to let Jack in, and the weight of Jack’s head - complete with gold-blonde fluffiness, warm skin, cut cheekbone, the faintest trace of stubble growing - is on his left shoulder, buried against the skin of Gabriel’s neck. An arm slings across Gabriel’s chest, and without even thinking about it, Gabriel’s right hand moves to meet it. Fingers interlace with fingers and -

They are woven together.

“...Gabi,” Jack murmurs, half-asleep and half-asleptalking.

“...I’m here,” Gabriel whispers back, as the halfness of being awake gives way to the draw of sleep. But still he manages to say into the half-dawn, “Estoy contigo.”

“...Y yo, contigo…” Jack sighs -

Completing their halfness.

Gabriel sleeps -

--------

And I'll use you as a makeshift gauge
Of how much to give and how much to take
Oh I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense then you'll lose your mind

Oh and I found love where it wasn't supposed to be
He wakes to bright sunlight and a stiff back.

Gabriel blinks several times against the sharp sting of the morning sun before he shifts against several pillows, a blanket, and the hard carpeted floor. His arms are empty, which is a surprise, but not a big one, and when he sits up and stretches his back, he can see that the beds are empty too.

Directly in front of him, to the east, is one of the windows, cracked open to let in the sea air and solar radiance, thin curtains fluttering gently against the wind.

He watches the sunlight dazzle on the blue upon blue upon blue of the water’s surface and - 

There are heavy footsteps on the landing behind him - 

The door to the room creaks open to a voice humming low and sweet, “- It’s faaaaaaar, beyond the stars - it’s near, beyond the moon - I know, beyond a doubt -”

Gabriel twists slightly as Jack enters, carrying several packs of snacks, a long loaf of bread, a bag of something that looks vaguely like a bunch of round fruits, and a sandwich. His partner is looking contentedly preoccupied as he stuffs the electronic keycard to the room back into a fatigue pocket, and his pile of food wobbles precariously but does not fall. He takes several half steps into the room, nudging the door closed with a foot, still singing to himself (much to Gabriel’s amusement):

“- my heart will lead me there soon - We’ll meet, beyond the shore - We’ll kiss, just as before - OH.”

Jack dead stops by the foot of the bed Reinhardt and Ana had slept in as his eyes finally look at Gabriel.

The older soldier grins broadly, “Haven’t heard you sing in a while. That was cute.”

“Everything I do is cute,” Jack states gruffly before he unceremoniously dumps his groceries on the bed and wedges the rest of the sandwich in his mouth.

“...Okay, that’s a little less cute,” Gabriel mutters as Jack chews noisily, saying thickly, “Okaf, firth off, fhat’s rhude.”

“I don’t wanna hear about my lack of manners from the guy currently talking with his mouth full,” Gabriel grumbles as Jack swallows the bite (or rather what should have been several bites). The blonde beams at him smugly, charmingly, saying roguishly, “I could fill my mouth with something else.”

“...Yeah, you brought in like a hundred pieces of food,” Gabriel says dryly as Jack’s smirk flags a little. The sitting soldier sighs contemplatively, “Maybe like an apple or something?”
“...Your ability to prevent yourself from getting willing and - frankly - highly sexy blowjobs is astounding,” Jack compliments him, “Like you got that shit down to a science at this point.”

“You know what they say - play to your strengths,” Gabriel chuckles, before twisting around and flopping back on the pillows. He says confidently, “Besides, it pales before your ability to want to give me blowjobs. Also I’m pretty sure at this point in our relationship, dumbass jokes turn you on.”

From an upside down perspective, Gabriel watches as Jack mulls it over, before he mutters, “...When you’re right, you’re right.”

“...About which part?”

“¿Por qué no los dos?” Jack wisecracks as he lightly steps past Gabriel. Gabriel’s eyes follow him, watching him appreciatively as Jack stands -

And then kneels -

And then seats himself on Gabriel’s lap.

Finally.

Finally together.

“...You had coffee,” Gabriel observes aloud and Jack grins wickedly, “They have fucking great coffee down at the cafe in the Mercado plaza. And also I slept really well for the first time in like, three days, dude. It’s been a helluva week.”

“What a coincidence - it’s been a helluva week for me too,” Gabriel smiles back, reflecting Jack’s sheer boundless joy, but underneath -

The image of Jack, surrounded by the golden glow of the biotic field, further surrounded by Bastions, weighs heavily on him, heavier than Jack’s weight right now -

It fucking terrifies him -

“Mmm, I can fix that,” Jack murmurs, his grin shifting from smug to sly as he bends over to -

“Jack, wait -” Gabriel starts but he stops as rough, warm lips press into his and even though half of his brain wants to keep talking about that fucking terror, the other half of his brain melts into the moment, sighing into the relief of Jack’s gentle, playful kisses, letting Jack pull him down into the undertow of their existences -

Jack relishes at the slight surprise on Gabriel’s lips - how it gives way to contentment, the sweetest sigh, how that turns into Gabriel kissing back, the soft hair of his mustache and beard brushing tenderly against his own slight stubble. His hands press into Gabriel’s chest and he feels fingers grip at his hips and -

They are woven together.

They pull apart to breathe and -

“Jack, wait, stop -” Gabriel gasps and Jack gives him a slightly confused look, saying, “Don’t worry - the others went to the beach -”
“We need to talk.”

Oh.

That.

“...Like I said, your ability to stop this vibe dead in its tracks is astounding,” Jack says with a touch of honey-silk venom to his words. Gabriel scowls at him deeply and Jack sighs, sitting back slightly, murmuring, “You really want to do this now?”

“You’re the one who wanted to have this talk in the first place,” Gabriel grumbles at him and Jack’s eyes narrow at that before he mutters slowly, “...I did, you’re right. I still do. I was hoping to get fucked senseless first but -”

“Jack,” Gabriel warns him and the younger soldier sighs again, saying, “Never hurts to try.”

“You are pushing your luck with my good mood right now,” his commander snaps at him, “You wanted to talk, so let’s fucking talk because - believe me - I have got some shit to say.”

Jack’s eyes turn to thunderstorms, churning and swirling with lightning pulse flashes, but Gabriel’s own eyes burn, melting red and gold and amber into pure fusion.

They are together but -

“Alright, I’ll start,” Jack bores down at him, folding his arms across his chest as he glowers at Gabriel. The second-in-command states darkly, “You need to stop with the fucking hero act in our battles.”

“I need to stop?” Gabriel demands in fury and Jack outright glares at him, growling, “Yeah, that’s fucking right - you throwing yourself recklessly into danger just to follow your often insane battle plans is NOT acceptable. We’re five fucking years into this now, Gabriel, and you need to learn that risking yourself like that is NOT okay.”

“You know what’s not okay? That fucking STUNT you pulled where you basically stood up and LITERALLY TOOK RAW GUNFIRE in - I don’t fucking know - some misguided attempt to protect me,” Gabriel snarls and Jack snaps back, “I did what I needed to do.”

“‘Needed to do?’ And all that shit about thanking me for our near-DECADE of love and friendship?” Gabriel is practically shouting at this point, his fingertips digging into Jack’s hips. The commander heaves, “What the actual fuck, Jack? It sounded like you were fucking prepared to die -”

“I AM prepared to die for you.”

Gabriel gives him the most incredulous and hurt look of confusion Jack has ever seen, but Jack - Jack understands.

He sighs deeply, “This is what I meant when I said we need to talk about priorities -”

“It’s not fair.”

Jack refocuses on Gabriel, whose gaze is burning furiously, clashing sunstrikes against raintorrent and the commander half-shouts, half-whines, “It’s not fucking FAIR that you get to lecture me on my issues with self-sacrifice and then turn around and you do exactly the same!”
And Jack -

Something snaps inside Jack.

“You’re right. It’s not fucking FAIR - it’s not SUPPOSED to be fair,” Jack growls, his fury and his terror and his fear threatening to overwhelm him. Gabriel gives him that incredulous look again, demanding, “What the fuck -”

“Life isn’t FAIR, Gabriel, that’s the fucking point - but you’re wrong because that unfairness isn’t against you,” Jack starts, feeling the storm of his emotions wind and surge up inside him and Gabriel is -

Something inside Gabriel breaks.

“I don’t understand,” the commander mutters darkly, and the second-in-commander laughs harshly, “Yeah, that much is fucking obvious -”

“Then make me understand, Jack.”

Jack looks at him with raging, storming fervor, before he half-snarsl, half-sobs, “YOU are more important than ME -”

“Oh, hell no,” Gabriel interrupts but Jack just continues, “There’s no FAIRNESS to this. You are more valuable than me -”

“This is NOT happening here -”

“It IS happening, Gabriel,” Jack half-shouts, half-pleads, grabbing at Gabriel’s shoulders to try and anchor them together. His voice breaks and cracks, but his storm is still building and constructing, as he verges on overrunning:

“And somehow, after five years of going through this shit, you somehow STILL DON’T REALIZE that you - Commander of Overwatch, one of the greatest military strategists of our time, the only person to destroy tens - maybe hundreds of Central Cores and capture multiple God Programs - are more valuable than anyone else in the WORLD right now. You CANNOT behave as recklessly as you do because EVERYONE depends on you, including me.”

“That’s not an excuse for your behavior, Jack -” Gabriel attempts to start, but Jack is going:

“It IS because your life is worth more than mine. EVERYTHING in my power is here for your protection, it is here to be your support. I am not your REPLACEMENT, Gabriel Reyes, I am your PAWN.”

Gabriel -

His heart cracks inside him.

The air in his lungs weighs.

Gabriel gasps, “Do you actually fucking believe that??’’

And Jack -

I’m with you.

Time breaks for Jack.
The words in his soul weigh.

Jack feels them lighten as he says:

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt, yes. Reinhardt is your shield, Torbjorn is your weapons master, Ana is your hunter, and I am your pawn. One is your protector, one is your smith, one is your ghost sniper, and I am your soldier.”

Gabriel does **not** understand.

Not only is he ineloquent in this moment, but he has literally been rendered speechless by the weight of Jack’s words.

Jack gives him an exhausted, heavy smile, each word is a sunfall cloud lifted from his soul, “We are here because YOU brought us here to destroy destruction, to fight war with war, to end the apocalypse with a reckoning. But we are only here because YOU are here to lead us, to command us, to light the path forward. Without YOU, humanity would have been annihilated four years ago. We are not your *equals*, Gabriel, and all of us KNOW this.”

“Wait, what - the others feel the same?” Gabriel stammers, still reeling from the information, still feeling like he’s being held down underwater, dark and submerged and *deeply overwhelmed* by everything Jack is pouring on him. Jack just looks at him, his normally clear blue eyes are long with shadows and ashes to ashes as he states softly, hoarsely, “Of *course* they do - do you think the four of us haven’t talked about this? We follow your orders, however reckless some of them are, because we KNOW you have seen the path forward through each battle, you have seen how to break the enemy and how to build our strengths - we follow you because we know you are all that we have.”

Gabriel thinks someone is breaking his heart in his chest -

Jack may still be straddling his hips, but it feels like -

Jack is kneeling before alabaster and stone, marigold and amaranth -

Jack is offering something red and gold and amber to Gabriel’s pedestal, as he says:

“But we also KNOW that when we hit that upper limit - *ours*, not *yours* - and see the light for *our* ends, that we have to abandon your orders, however strategically *correct* they are, for *our* orders - protect and defend, shoot and shield so that YOU survive.”

Jack knows.

Jack understands.

He cannot be everything for Gabriel.

But he will give -

“None of us see this as needless self-sacrifice,” Jack says with a *heartbreaking smile*, “Because the cause of saving YOU is just as important as the cause of ending this Crisis and helping the world.”

“I… *joder*, fuck, holy shit I -” Gabriel struggles, choking on the pieces of his heart in his throat. He is floored - literally and figuratively - by the sheer weight of Jack and his paradigm.

“The others have constraints,” Jack continues, as if Gabriel is not *breaking apart at the seams* beneath him. He spreads his hands on Gabriel’s chest, feeling the rise and fall of his harsh breathing,
the beat-beat-beating of his heart, the regality and depth of his existence, and Jack smiles to himself, saying, “Ana has Fareeha, Reinhardt has Ana, Torbjörn has Helena, but you are MINE. You are all that limits me. And by that I mean, you break my limits because there is nothing of me and mine that is not YOURS.”

Because it is true.

Because following Gabriel is Jack’s path in life.

Because covering his back is what Jack was made for.

But Gabriel -

*Gabriel does not understand.*

At these words, something *sparks* inside him and he half-shouts, half-pleads, “Don’t SAY that -”

“It’s TRUE, Gabriel,” Jack starts to insist, starting to feel the storm overwhelm him, the mad surge and rush to spill his truths and share his heart, but Gabriel covers his eyes with his hands, practically *sobbing*, “Don’t DO THIS to me - to us -”

But Jack -

“I have given you EVERYTHING,” Jack says, every word is a truth, every word is a paradigm, as he bends, shutting his eyes, putting his forehead against the warm richness of Gabriel’s chest, just above his heart.

He has given everything -

But he still does not deserve what he has received -

Gabriel’s love.

Warm smiles, bright laughter, burning jokes, sunrise teases, sunset kisses, radiant eyes, gilded arms -

Gabriel’s sunstar heart.

A sense of purpose -

A sense of promise, of betterment, of togetherness -

To chase down the dream, to follow down the dawn, through the valley of the shadow of death, through the circles of Hell, through the ashes to ashes and dust to dust of the apocalypse -

To arrive in a new world where his sun always shines.

Jack murmurs deeply against Gabriel’s chest:

“All home I’ve ever had, every friendship and relationship I’ve ever cherished, every dream I’ve ever strived for, every hope I’ve ever entertained - even my fucking blankets and gloves and beanies.”

Beneath him, beneath his weight, Gabriel shudders and surges. He covers his eyes in fury, but there is no hiding from the storm, no hiding from the sea that comes to claim him, to stake him as its own. He pulls his hands from his eyes, looking at the white ceiling, bright with the light of the day, touched blue in the corners with the distant reflection of the water. He feels Jack’s head on his chest,
the weight of his existence pulling him down into the undercurrent, and he wants nothing more than to drown in everything Jack will offer, he wants to accept the honey-sweetness of his words but he knows he knows he knows -

He has to try to rise, to bring them both to the surface for air.

But he tries.

Oh, he fucking tries.

“...This isn’t how I see us at all,” Gabriel whispers, his heart is still breaking, cracking, he doesn’t know how to fix this, how to make it better. He wants he wants he wants -

But not this.

He does not want this.

He does not want Jack, surrounded by the golden glow, surrounded by living guns, a look of hellfire and sacrifice on his face -

He wants Jack.

Just Jack.

Jack opens his eyes, starting at the closeness of Gabriel’s white t-shirt, letting his fingers trace across soft cotton and lines of muscle. He feels Gabriel’s left hand wind into his hair, running through golden softness, fingernails scratching lightly across his scalp and Jack sighs with reverence and contentment.

He knows.

He knows what he means to Gabriel.

Jack smiles, “...I know. You see us as equals, as partners. And Gabriel, that is exactly why I have given you everything anyways. Because everyone else - including myself - KNOWS you are more important in every way, but you still see us as the same. You don’t see an Overwatch agent, or a supersoldier, or even just a halfassed medic on the field.”

Jack feels sunlight playing with his hair.

He feels the rise and fall of the world breathing.

He feels the rhythm of a heart - beat-beat-beating red amaranth and orange marigold, gold honey and pink rose, amber cream and purple lavender.

His heart, the only heart that matters.

His heart, which values the weight of their separate existences as equals.

His heart, which only sees them as interwoven with threads and stitches of gold.

His heart, which only -

“You see me as Jack. You see me as me,” Jack says sweet and low, as soft as the sunrise, “And for that, I will give even my life and death to.”
Gabriel stares at the ceiling.
He feels the sea-sweet softness of Jack’s hair.
He feels the press of Jack’s fingertips against his chest, touches that warm his spirit and set him alight.
He feels the swell of the water of life in his soul.
His heart beat-beat-beats with the flood of Jack.
He wants he wants he wants
But not like this -
“I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want to know that you don’t value yourself,” Gabriel says to the sun-kissed, seabreeze air, weightless and bright, and Jack laughs dryly into the warmth of his shirt and the rich skin and the heart beating colors underneath, “…I never said that. I value myself pretty highly.”
“…You have always had a high opinion of yourself,” Gabriel cracks with a wry, dead tone and, lifting his head to look at his commander, Jack grins brightly, “Exactly! But I have an even higher opinion of you.”
The hand that was in his hair drifts down to hold Jack’s right, their fingers intertwining across Gabriel’s heart.
Gabriel gives him a sunset-soft, heartbreaking smile.
And Jack -
“…I have one thing left that’s mine,” Jack says, the words deep like molasses in his throat, because he will give everything to make that smile better -
“Huh?” Gabriel asks, looking mildly confused as Jack -
He lifts Gabriel’s left hand in his right, pressing his lips and murmuring against those rich-toned fingers, “And I want to give it to you too.”
Gabriel looks quizzical, muttering dryly, “I don’t even know what you’re talking -”
Jack releases Gabriel’s hand -
His hands move up, back, to the lock on the ball chain around his neck.
Gabriel freezes -
Because Gabriel understands.
Gabriel understands before anyone else ever would.
he wants he wants he wants -
Jack undoes the latch, pulling his Army dog tags out from beneath his shirt.
“...Oh fuck me,” Gabriel breathes in shock and reverence and sheer awe, and Jack just cracks a
wicked grin, “Well, I tried offering that part first, but you’re gonna have to wait.”

Jack glances down at the dog tags:

Morrison

John M

2521876127

A Neg

No Preference

He’s worn these for the entirety of the Crisis, ever since SEP started more… “public” joint missions with the Army. He’s worn these ever since he knew his purpose was to follow Gabriel into war. He’s worn these through every real battle he’s ever fought, through fire and flood, bullets and blood. He’s worn these, even as his heart stitched him a new family, forged in war and loud jokes, shared smiles and strong drinks, fire and flood, bullets and blood.

He’s worn these knowing full well they could end up being all of him that survives the war.

He hasn’t taken them off since the moment they were given to him.

Jack knows they are all he has left of himself.

Jack knows.

But that’s not what he wants.

Jack stares at the dog tags, before locking his eyes with Gabriel’s wide, open gaze.

“I want to give you my name too,” Jack states.

Gabriel chokes on his own air, “Holy shit.”

“I don’t want to be Jack Morrison anymore. I haven’t wanted to be Jack Morrison in a long time. I haven’t been Jack Morrison in years, not in my heart. And we both know this,” Jack says as simply as he can. Because it is the truth. He can say the exact date - almost down to the minute - of when he met Gabriel, of when his world slowly began to shift on its paradigm, yet he cannot say the exact date of when this feeling began -

Just that he knows it began, however small, however miniscule, in the undergrowth of his existence -

And with light and water, comfort and nourishment -

Warm smiles, bright laughter, burning jokes, sunrise teases, sunset kisses, radiant eyes, gilded arms -

Fed by underground rivers of milk-honey radiance and glowing life liquid -

The seed has grown into his tree of life, rooted in his existence, watered by his heart blood, lit by the dawn, grown by the day, silhouetted by the dusk -

It has a different name.

It wants a different name.
Its name is -

“...I was gonna wait until after this fucking war was over to bring this up,” Gabriel murmurs, still torn between tenderness, love, affection, fear, and exhaustion. And yet the emotion that burns the strongest is -

“I don’t want to wait anymore,” Jack whispers back, wrapping his hand around Gabriel’s again. Gabriel watches as Jack lifts his left hand to his lips and kisses his palm and -

The emotions that burn the strongest are pragmatism and -

“We’re not getting married while this war is happening.” Gabriel informs him, even as his left hand betrays him and he caresses Jack’s cheek, the stubble prickling slightly, but Jack leans into the touch, still holding his hand. Despite the incredible happiness welling up inside him, Gabriel scowls, saying, “Fuck, we probably aren’t getting married even after the war is done because there’s gonna be so much shit to do.”

“...I know,” Jack sighs into his palm, his eyes watching Gabriel through a half-lidded gaze. He says with a little more strength in his words, “This isn’t about certificates or legalities. This is about us. I am offering you the last part of me that I still have. When this war is over, when I am not your pawn or your soldier, I want to be your partner again. And your best friend. And your lover. And eventually, at some point, your husband. I want to go back to seeing us the way you still do. I want to value us, together, as highly as you do - as highly as I value and prioritize you right now.”

And Gabriel -

The incredible happiness inside him breaks.

And the last emotion, the strongest of them all -

Anger -

Wins the war.

He stares at Jack as the sun inside his heart explodes - he stares in silence as the emotion crashes and burns and ruins every coherent thought in his head. He stares in silence because the anger somehow only accentuates his incredible happiness, and he’s not sure he has the ability or the eloquence to explain that these two emotions are not fighting each other, but fighting against everything else -

Together.

Gabriel stares at Jack in silence as the boundless joy and rage burn and build and construct back together, out of the ashes and dust of his other thoughts and -

Jack looks terrified.

Jack should never look like that -

“...Please say something. Please say that makes sense,” Jack whispers urgently and Gabriel -

“...It makes a fuckton of sense and I fucking hate it.” Gabriel snaps, feeling the twin serpents of love and light, fear and fury wrap around his heart and burn it, but he tries -

Oh, he fucking tries -

To temper the fusion of their spiraling helix in his heart. He tries - oh, he fucking tries - to douse
them slightly in the cool, cleansing sea of Jack’s words, to drown them in sweet softness.

“...I’m collecting my thoughts,” Gabriel tells him, even as his left hand betrays him and continues to touch Jack’s face with the torrent of affection and fondness and admiration he has always felt for the other. Jack’s fear softens and good, that is more like how he should look -

“...That’s okay,” Jack says back, smiling soothingly, “Take your time. I was...worried you were mad -”

“I’m accepting these on three conditions.”

Jack stops as Gabriel merges his emotions and his words - his strengths and weaknesses, his mundane and his unique, his ordinary and his extraordinary - and he levels his sunflared gaze at Jack’s, saying as clearly as he can:

“One - you never call yourself a pawn again. Two - you never call yourself MY PAWN ever again. Three - you stop thinking about yourself as less than me.”

Jack suddenly looks terrified again.

“You accept these, I accept your dog tags, we look at our marriage options when this fucking war is over - because, trust me, Jack, I want, I really, honestly want to marry you, but I’m not doing it when you hold me up on this fucking pedestal -”

“I can’t DO THAT,” Jack half-shouts, half cries with desperation, “I can’t do that, not while we’re still fighting, not when your reckless ass keeps throwing itself in danger -”

“Then I can’t fucking accept these,” Gabriel growls and Jack glares, practically snarling, “Dammit, Gabriel -”

“No, stop,” Gabriel snaps at him, his left hand finally catching up and tugging lightly, gently at Jack’s chin to pull his gaze a little more level with Gabriel’s own. His right hand goes to Jack’s hip and he cocks his head slightly as he states with all the controlled joy-fury, love-hate he can manage to put into words, “You had your chance to say your piece, so now I get to say mine, though it won’t be half as pretty as the way you said your shit.”

Jack’s glare shifts into a glower, and he settles back slightly on Gabriel’s hips, looking at him with heaving, critical assessment.

And Gabriel goes off:

“We need to get this settled between us, Jack - I fucking know what I mean to this war. You think I fucking don’t? You think I didn’t figure that out five years ago? Gabrielle recruited me FIRST, before she spoke to anyone else in the world, because my strategies crushed the Bakersfield Central Core. Not you, not anyone else on this team - ME. She asked ME FIRST, and this is why I’m commander.”

Jack’s gaze flickers with a touch of soft sunlight.

Gabriel burns at the look because he wants he wants he wants -

“You need to understand something about my priorities,” Gabriel explains to him, strong and soft, gentle and joy-furious, even as his left hand returns to touching that face, that spirit he loves so much, even as his right hand glides along the curve of Jack’s hip bone and he’s off again, “I don’t give a fuck about the world. I don’t give a fuck about saving like 99% of humanity. It can fuck off into the
abyss for all I care. When Gabrielle came to recruit me, it was a 50-50 swing vote in my head between joining Overwatch, and taking you, my mom and sisters, and like three other people from SEP and West Point and moving to the fucking Arctic circle for the rest of our lives.”

“What the hell, Gabriel -” Jack half-snorts, half-laughs, half-snaps, but Gabriel is going - the song of the sun and the storm is swirling in his head, the sunfall cloud of joy-fury, love-hate, happiness-anger weighs upon him like a melody he can only hope to hum the beat-beat-beat to.

Gabriel is going:

“But first off, we both know how I handle snow, so that was out of the question and living in a desert with the constant risk of drought was just as shitty an idea, so really, neither of those were happening. And second off, I picked joining Overwatch because YOU were gonna pick joining Overwatch.”

This gets Jack to look at him in abject confusion, and his partner states, “What.”

“Understand, Jack,” Gabriel says to him, with a touch of strong softness to his voice, a tender forcefulness, “There’s no NOBLE goal here, there’s never been a NOBLE goal in my heart. Everything I’ve ever done has been for six reasons: my mom, my uncle, my two sisters, YOU, and my own goddamn selfishness. And frankly, since then, YOU have come to eclipse all other reasons, including my own fucked up sense of priorities.”

The tense confusion in Jack’s focus shifts -

It melts

Into a dark, submerged, deep understanding.

Finally.

Fucking finally.

Jack understands -

“I fight because I love fighting,” Gabriel tells him, “Because I’m fucking good at it, and because I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you were going to be with me every step of the way.”

And the joy-fury, the happiness-anger, the love-hate melts down, fuses in the core of his burning, sunflared heart and Gabriel -

In this moment, he is

so warm

so unconditional

so everlasting

so complete.

This moment - lying on the floor, the weight of Jack and his heart settling upon him, the edges of Jack’s daybreaking smile being traced by his left fingers, the strength of Jack’s body being held by his right hand, the underwater light of Jack’s eyes reflecting over his, the sunkissed seabreeze of the room, weightless and airy and softened at the edges -
This moment perfects him.

Gabriel grins at him:

“And that continues beyond this moment, beyond this fucking war, beyond whatever shitshow of a global trash clean up we gotta do after this. I told you years ago - *I’m with you.*”

Jack’s smile breaks, but *in the best way possible,* “Gabriel, wait -”

But Gabriel *is going:*

“So I’m not fucking accepting your literal name tags when you attach the strings of ‘Well, I would willingly throw myself on the blade for you,’ because there are no fucking asterisks to this partnership. There are no fine lines. There are no additional clauses. Protecting me for the greater world might be YOUR priority, but it’s not mine - it never has been and it *never will be.*”

And his right hand catches Jack’s left, the one holding his dog tags, and pulls it to Gabriel’s lips. He hears the clink of metal on metal as Jack’s name shifts against itself, even as he wraps his hand around his partner’s, murmuring against that sunkissed, seabreeze skin:

“Because without YOU, I wouldn’t even *be here.* If you had died in Bakersfield, I would have gone home and probably drank until I gave myself alcohol poisoning. If you had decided not to join Overwatch, I wouldn’t have either. If you had died at any point in the last four years, I would have quit and like...gone on to live in a cave in Hawaii or something with your ashes.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Jack half-whispers, half-chokes, half-laughs, “What a fucking *image* -”

“You said that the very scheme of Overwatch is unfair,” Gabriel grins at the humor that returns to Jack’s gaze, saying against rough, warm knuckles, “That the very priorities of this whole mini family we got here are unfair because they center around keeping me alive for the good of the world. But I’m here to tell you, John fucking Morrison, that this is unfair *because* these are not my priorities - *they never have been and they never will be* - and it is unfair to you all that you throw your fucking lives on the line for one man who would rather break his own limits and himself instead of seeing any of you *pinche pendejos* die.”

Jack’s gaze melts a little further, looks a little more contemplative as Gabriel continues:

“We ARE partners, Jack. We’ve always have been and we always will be. But I can’t fucking accept your goddamn name and your fucking ring finger if you’re gonna spend the rest of this war prioritizing me over you - over us, over this team.”

And in his heart of hearts -

Out of the emotion that he does not have the words to describe -

He gives Jack everything he holds close to his soul:

“We’re either ‘us together’ or ‘monster and soldier apart’ - there are no asterisks and clauses. I’m not going to bind my heart to yours if all you’re going to do is cut your heart out and sacrifice it to me the moment supplies run dry and shit goes pear-shaped. Your heart by itself means NOTHING to me if it’s not beating in your chest.”

Jack chokes on his air.

His heart, his soul, his very existence, which he offered to Gabriel -
Is placed back in his chest, by hands that are strong and soft, gentle and playful -

Stitched back into place by warm smiles, bright laughter, burning jokes, sunrise teases, sunset kisses, radiant eyes, gilded arms -

And Jack is breaking the surface of the water, gasping, “...God dammit…”

Gabriel’s scowling, mischievous smile is the softest sunrise he has ever seen.

“...The WORLD means nothing to me if your heart is not beating in your chest,” Gabriel says, pressing that smile against his knuckles and Jack -

He doesn’t want to rebury his heart, his soul, his existence back in his chest -

He doesn’t want them to be anywhere but in Gabriel’s hands.

But Gabriel’s hands around his heart are not where Gabriel wants them -

Gabriel’s hands are wrapped around his, fingers intertwined -

Woven together.

“When the time comes, I want to marry Jack - not John fucking Morrison, not some halfassed soldier-medic, not some asshole who think he’s my pawn that can die and leave me in this fucked up world all alone,” Gabriel tells him, watching the emotions shift and change so vividly and visibly on his partner’s face.

Gabriel stares and waits.

“...I’m collecting my thoughts,” is all Jack can muster, and Gabriel murmurs against his hand, “I’m here. I can wait.”

“...I just - just like that,” Jack half-chokes, half-pleads, half-struggles, “You always fuck up my plans and my life and - god fucking dammit, Gabriel - I had this shit under control and you just -”

Gabriel smirks smugly, “I’m pretty damn good at making you come undone.”

“Oh, god dammit, Gabriel,” Jack half-laughs, half-sobs, and suddenly Gabriel is laughing back and the sound is bright and beautiful and radiant, weightless and airy, and Jack -

He wants he wants he wants -

He wants to give everything to hear that laughter for the rest of his life.

He’s willing to rebury his heart, his soul, his existence back in his chest -

In exchange for Gabriel’s hand around his, Gabriel’s name married to his, Gabriel’s laughter sung with his.

They’ll take that exchange, of hands, and names, and laughter.

Until death do them part.

“I can’t… It won’t be EASY for me...to do this,” Jack says, through his laughter, “I’ve spent four years with this mindset. You have to understand that.”
“...Of course I understand that. I’m a patient man, Jack,” Gabriel grins at him.

Jack gives him a deadpan expression at that.

“...For you, I’ll be patient,” Gabriel corrects himself, and Jack sighs, “...All I can do is try. I mean - I will. I’ll fucking try. I’ll try my best. I’ll try my best to shift priorities, but that’s like...that’s like a paradigm shift to me.”

“I know,” Gabriel tells him, and Jack says shakily, “I’m not...I’m not on the same level as you. As a soldier. As a fighter. As a leader.”

“That’s not true -” Gabriel begins, and Jack tries -

To really tell him, to truly convey it to Gabriel as he says, “But I’m going to fucking try.”

“...I trust you, you know,” Gabriel replies with that sunrise smile, “To make it better. To prioritize ‘us together.’”

That trust -

That respect -

That love -

That means everything to Jack.

“And I don’t want you as any of those things,” Gabriel continues, trying to give words to the song in his heart, “You’re Jack. That’s all I want you to give to me. There are no asterisks, no clauses, no fine lines. You’re just Jack and you’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

“...This isn’t where I wanted this conversation to go AT ALL,” Jack admits and Gabriel just chuckles, “I know. I’m pretty damn good at fucking up your life.”

“That much we agree on,” Jack laughs back, pressing his *boundless smile* to Gabriel’s palm, and Gabriel returns the favor, grinning roguishly against Jack’s hand, still wrapped around -

“...Will you take them?” Jack asks in a softer voice, shifting his left hand wrapped around his dog tags, adding, “If not for my name, then as a sign that I’m committed to making us better together?”

Gabriel stares at him, collecting his thoughts -

And then sits up.

They adjust slightly, Jack shifting back a little ways to let Gabriel into his space. Gabriel withdraws his hands from Jack’s, moving them behind his neck to the ball chain latch there. He clicks it, pulling out his own dog tags from beneath his shirt, and he smirks at Jack, “Then you have to be willing to take mine too. Vows and all that shit.”

“As eloquent as ever, Gabi,” Jack snorts and Gabriel just points a finger at him, his other fingers still holding the little metal id’s, muttering tartly, “Hey, I gave you the fucking disclaimer at the start that this wouldn’t be some beautiful romantic speech. You accept that too, by the way. If you take these, you accept that I’m never gonna be that fucking commander on a pedestal you assholes seem to think I’m gonna become. You also accept that when I do say my real vows, they’re also gonna be shit. I’m just warning you. So you keep your expectations low. So this fucking situation doesn’t happen
all over again.”

“Well then. With a promise like that, how could I say no?” Jack smirks, and Gabriel flashes that bright, sunshine grin at him, saying, “I know. I’m pretty god damn good at persuasion.”

“Such a fucking high opinion of yourself,” Jack laughs, reflecting Gabriel’s own light atmosphere back and Gabriel can’t stop smiling, saying, “Only because you’re with me.”

And then -

Gabriel wraps his arms around Jack, pinning his arms in playfully.

“Ah, dammit, Gabriel,” Jack swears, but he’s smiling, he’s smiling, as Gabriel cackles, snapping the ball chain into the latch behind Jack’s neck and Jack -

He feels a familiar yet different weight settle around his neck -

And in this moment, he is not one -

But half of two.

Gabriel smiles at him, withdrawing his arms, as Jack glances down. His right fingers are already tracing the familiar yet different metal, fingertips brushing over

Reyes Solís

Gabriel S

2371212776

O Neg

No Preference

Gabriel watches the emotions shift over Jack’s face, but he’s smiling, he’s smiling as he slowly unwinds Jack’s left fingers with his right hand, pulling Jack’s dog tags and name closer and -

Jack looks up to see Gabriel gently kiss the metal plates hanging against this palm with such tenderness, such reverence and Jack half-chokes, “Gabriel, wait -”

“Let’s get married when things are better,” Gabriel says calmly, clearly, looking at him with eyes that burn. He grins viciously, vividly, vibrantly, “Let’s get married when the world is fucking better.”

“Mmm, I can fix a lot of things, but that?” Jack chuckles deeply, “That one’s gonna be kinda hard.”

“I trust you to make it better,” Gabriel smirks as Jack moves to wrap his arms around him, clicking the ball chain into the lock. Jack leans in against him as Gabriel’s arms settle around his waist, pressing his cheek against Gabriel’s as he chuckles dryly, “You’re asking way too much of me. I’m just a soldier, Gabriel - barely one at that.”

“I dunno, Jack,” Gabriel says, and Jack can feel his shit-eating grin against his skin. Jack runs his fingers across the buzz of Gabriel’s hair, relishing how the short hairs fuzz against his hand as Gabriel’s hands press into his back, pulling him a bit closer.

Gabriel chuckles wryly, “You do a helluva lot for this band of misfits - pretty sure we’d all be dead without you -”
“You all fucking know that biotic fields are literally just a button to press, right?” Jack mutters, “It’s not rocket science.”

“Okay, but like, pressing a button is really hard when you have a shotgun in each hand,” Gabriel states and Jack just groans, “You don’t HAVE to use two shotguns, you know - you almost never fire them at the same time anyways, so what’s the difference between carrying just one and using the other hand for...something better?”

Gabriel leans back a little and gives him a wide, horrified stare before stating as clearly as he can, “...Dual. Fucking. Shot. Guns.”

“...The fucking heavy pulse rifle takes two hands to hold,” Jack mutters slowly, as the realization dawns on him:

“Why the fuck am I this team’s medic when I also have to carry the biggest gun?”

Gabriel gives him a dead look as Jack heaves, “Oh my fucking god, you don’t even need a shotgun in each hand, you could be deploying biotic fields all the fucking time.”

“...So as I was trying to say.” Gabriel growls as Jack mutters, “I’m never saving your ass again - you’re even fucking ambidextrous. There is literally no reason you cannot deploy a biotic field yourself, qué carajos.”

And Gabriel grins because -

That -

That is the Jack he knows.

That is the Jack he loves.

“So as I was trying to say,” Gabriel chuckles as Jack buries his head against Gabriel’s neck, still grumbling about biotic fields, but Gabriel doesn’t care -

He just plows on with his point:

“...You basically keep this team together, Jack,” he says with a softer confidence and he feels Jack flinch slightly in his arms. Gabriel rubs at his back, muttering, “I develop our fucking insane strategies because I know you’re there to keep us together, to anchor us, to rally us when we fall apart. My plans rely on you being the axis the rest of us can rotate around. I put myself in danger because I know you’ll be there to put my pieces back together.”

“...You really shouldn’t be that reckless,” Jack says against his warm, rich neck, “I can’t fix everything.”

“As long as you can fix yourself,” Gabriel chuckles back, “Because you’re everything to me.”

“...Oh god, they keep getting worse,” Jack growls and Gabriel laughs loudly, “See how you like a taste of your own medicine.”

“Tastes fucking awful,” Jack grins, pulling away slightly to tilt his crooked smile at Gabriel. Gabriel gives one right back, retorting, “But the saying is that revenge is sweet.”

“Every one of these jokes takes ten years off my life,” Jack teases at him, and Gabriel smirks, “You love them.”
“...And I love you too,” Jack adds, his teasing smile fading slightly before he asks, “...Please, just… be a little more careful out there.”

Gabriel stares at him softly before adding quietly, “For you, I will try.”

“...That’s all I’m asking for, Gabi,” Jack smiles and Gabriel gives him a sceptical look, saying gruffly, “Funny, I thought there was a conversation about getting married in there or something.”

“Well, that too,” Jack says, before smirking, “You get the biggest paycheck on this team.”

“...Never took you to be a gold-digger,” Gabriel mutters sourly, and Jack just laughs sweet and low, “Nah, I just have the highest-quality tastes: I only date kings and secret supra-national military task force commanders.”

“...When did you date a king?” Gabriel says dryly, “And where is he so I can brag about how much better I am than him?”

“...Jesus Christ, you need to be stopped,” Jack replies as Gabriel gives him the smuggest grin Jack has ever seen on him, taunting, “So stop me, Jack.”

“Trust me, I have a few ideas on how to get you to settle down,” Jack mutters gruffly, leaning in to kiss him. Gabriel’s smile is bright - it tastes just as warm and sweet, strong and soft, gentle and playful as Jack has ever wanted it to be, and when Gabriel kisses back, they melt together, into the weightless, airy atmosphere of the room. When they break apart, Gabriel tilts that self-satisfied smirk slightly, saying:

“...Well, you are gonna put a ball and chain on me.”

“...I was thinking more like handcuffs but if you wanna go big then I’m game,” Jack chuckles darkly, before kissing Gabriel again -

Gabriel’s fingers dig into Jack’s back, pulling him down -

Jack follows him down into the undercurrent of pillows and blankets and hard carpeted floors.

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And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me

And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me
And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me

Chapter End Notes

And the moment some people have been waiting for:

Old Habits 27.5: Namesake - Rating: Explicit, NSFW

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Next week, we return to the present, as the reaper and the soldier begin to reconsider their current paths in life...and begin to take steps towards new solutions.

...And new wars to fight.
Chapter Summary

[Atardecer - Dusk]
As the darkness fades, the reaper and the soldier think of all they have lost...and the new friends they have gained
As they search for the new paths that lead them back to each other.
...Do old habits ever really die?
...Do old loves?
[Partir en dos - literal: break in half, figurative: break your heart]

Chapter Notes

Please wait until the ride comes to a complete stop before disembarking.
We hope you enjoyed Old Habits' Wild Ride.
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Song is "Midnight Dove" by Shawn James (Youtube link)
(P.S. Be on the lookout for some surprises)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Midnight Dove,
Why do you wander
on through clouded skies?
There must be a glimpse of hope in sight.
Spread your wings and take to flight.
Leave the past behind.
The dawn will birth a brand new light.

So fly on and never look back from where you came.
The sky opens up and it's calling out your name.

Cause all you got is all -

All you got is all -

All that you need.

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Segador: The Beginning of the End

Saturday, July 10, 2076: 10:12 a.m. - on Avenue de la Misión, by the Panadería Las Nieblas in Dorado, Mexico

- the weight of his name is so slight, yet the metal tags hang heavy around his neck -

The air here is supposed to be lighter.

“¿Hola?”

He thinks someone is calling to him.

“¿Segador de almaaaasss?”

There is a voice saying something.

He thinks it might be the sea, blue upon blue upon blue, bright as stained glass beneath the eastern sun, full of bright whitegold light -

There was once a morning just like this one, filled with golden light, touched seaglass blue at the edges -

“- You with me?”

Reaper chokes on his own air. Gasping, sputtering, he turns his head to his left, where Sombra gives him an unimpressed eye roll.

They’re standing close to the edge of the cliff, paved with smoothed cobbles, just a short ways off from the bakery. They had spent much of the remainder of the night collecting the dead, Reaper not so secretly restocking on his “life energy levels,” hauling bodies and weapons and exploded parts of a truck back to the Los Muertos base and generally trying to avoid the police and the riled up LumériCo guards. After that, as David and some of the remaining Los Muertos members had assessed their losses, Sombra had reappeared from the innards of the base with a six pack of “Calavera Mexican Stout” and gestured to the stairs. He’d followed her to the top floor, where she cracked a window and hauled herself to the roof. He’d just wraithed up there, and they spent the rest of the early hours of the morning drinking and sipping and just kinda being there. There had been chatting, banter, low levels of muttered threats and neon glo-painted retorts, but mostly -

They had just kinda been there.

At some point Sombra had fallen asleep and Reaper had moaned and whined until shutting his own
eyes for restless, shifting, brightly-colored nightmares of blue lightning pulses and red screenglass
gazes and blue storm eyes.

He’d “woken” sometime in the early twilight of the morning.

He’d watched the slow sunrise, the rosettes of red and orange, gold and pink, amber and lavender
that brushed burnished coppery whitegold across the sky, the pastel oils drip-drip-dripping into the
sea, mixing the blue with the blood of the light.

The weight of Jack’s dog tags had felt heavy

Even as the air had felt light.

When the colors had started to fade into hazy blueness, he’d nudged Sombra awake and told her in
her sleep-addled state to get to a bed or a couch or something, he doesn’t want to sit on this fucking
roof forever. She’d grumbled and complained, but pulled herself back down through the open
window and he’d followed. She’d thrown herself onto a couch on the top floor and fallen asleep
again, Reaper had seated himself in a nearby chair and just -

Kinda been there.

Thinking.

Toying with the metal name hanging around his neck.

When she woke again a few hours later, he’d come back from the showers down the hall wearing his
mariachi charro outfit, saying he was gonna head out soon but Sombra had insisted he stay a little
longer - “let me get changed and get some breakfast, asshole.” He’d waited impatiently until she’d
come back from the showers with her mohawk relaxed, slumping around in those sports pants and
lightweight jacket, and then they had set off for the bakery by the Mission -

Only to discover it was closed for the morning.

Sombra had sighed hopelessly and Reaper -

Well.

He had just kinda been there.

Until this moment.

“WHAT,” he hacks at her and she wrinkles her face with mild disgust, saying, “Uh...you know? Are
you with me? You alert, amigo?”

“Yeah, shit, fuck, sorry,” he mutters, slowly recovering, “Just… thinking.”

“Yeah, no shit, I got that much,” Sombra starts to retort, when one of the green doors of the bakery
cracks open and a woman peeks out, glaring at them, whispering, “Estamos cerrados (tn: we are
closed).”

“Podemos ver eso (tn: we can see that),” Reaper cracks dryly but Sombra whips around, saying
cheerfully, “Silvia! ¿Por qué la panadería está cerrada (tn: Why is the bakery closed)?”

“Teníamos una emergencia de harina. Alejandra está comprando más (tn: we had a flour
emergency. Alejandra is buying more),” the baker - Silvia - informs them, and Sombra just shrugs,
sighing, “Bien. Volveremos luego (tn: Alright, we will return later).” As the door closes again, she
faces Reaper, gesturing up the street, saying, “Let’s go get something from the market.” She turns and starts heading up the westbound street, and Reaper follows. They walk past the ground-level archway where they had lost track of Jack only a few hours ago, as Sombra asks quietly, contemplatively:

“...What makes you think he’s left?”

As a red truck drives past them, and some more tourists appear out of a terraced lounge, Reaper heaves a massive sigh, muttering darkly, “He’s probably still around… but he won’t try anything. Not here, not anymore. This city means too much to him.”

“...What?” Sombra asks with some confusion as they turn up the street, under the very pedestrian bridge where he’d destroyed part of that damned mask and -

An eye of blue had seen him and -

“...Dorado is one of his favorite places in the world. This city means too much to him for him to keep warring in it, past the point of no return,” Reaper states dryly and Sombra gives him a quizzical look. As they enter the Mercado plaza proper, the crowd is growing thicker here, denser, and they have to slightly push their way forward, before Sombra nudges him to take a left by the partially-ruined torta stand. There are police everywhere, along with gawkers and tourists, angry, bitter locals and merchants - everyone assessing the damages in their own ways. Trying to stay above the noise volumes of the crowd, Reaper growls out, “Listen - your history books might say that Portero saved the city in la Batalla de Setenta y Dos, and they might say that… That ‘Reyes’ lead the Overwatch Strike team to push back the Omnic forces - but you should get something straight here.

“Jack Morrison kept everyone alive.”

They pause briefly in an open niche by the central monument pillar, and Sombra quirks an eyebrow at him skeptically, saying dryly, “...He undid a lot of that last night.”

“You joke, but Jack kept maybe half of the surviving rurales fighters alive by himself,” Reaper states to her and watches at how the confusion and surprise bloom on her face. He glances over the crowd, over the sea of people, saying softly, with a calm tenderness, “The Mexican government, the United Nations, Portero, the history books - they put too much emphasis on the Laguna Verde Power Plant. Energy is important to any war, sure, but the heart of this city - the heart of any city - is the people. And Jack understood that.”

...He still does.

“...Listen,” he mutters to her lowly, “It ain’t my goddamn place to tell you how to run your little revolution y’all are planning here, but you’re focusing far too much on energy. That’s not real fucking power. And that oldass soldier knew that better than your little squad did.”

Sombra glares at him, snapping, “I know that, pendejo.”

“I know you do,” Reaper retorts with a low chuckle, “You might be the only one of them that does. Weapons won’t win your war -”

“- Information will,” Sombra adds, flashing a wicked, vivid grin at him.

Behind the mask, Reaper smirks back.

But then his smile flags, and he grumbles, “Listen, I gotta do this -”
She rolls her eyes, sassing, “Oh great, here it comes -”

“I gotta do this ultimatum thing, alright? It’s part of the image. Plus, I gotta really fucking stress that if you sell me out -” Reaper snaps, his eyes flashing red upon red upon hellfire, but she remains unaunted, unfazed, even as he snarls, “- Well, should be obvious what’s gonna happen.”

“Relajate, amigo,” she sighs, “I have no interest in selling your name. It’s not worth anything of value anyways.”

“...You little shit,” Reaper chuckles but Sombra just grins again, saying, “Besides, I have my own agenda here -”

“I know,” he states to her dryly, before he drops the ultimatum:

“Which is why, in exchange for knowing my name, you come work for me when your revolution is done.”

He relishes in the look of abject shock that explodes across her face.

“¿Qué??” she demands and he laughs darkly, “Listen. You know shit. And even if you don’t, you have the ability to find it. I got questions and I need answers. And it’s pretty fucking obvious that you’re in the same boat. When you’re done screwing up Portero’s shit - which is all fine and dandy and all that jazz - you bring what you know and what you got to me and we crack down on the rest of this running list of bullshit I gotta clear up.”

“I am not working for Talon,” Sombra snaps at him furiously, but behind the mask, Reaper rolls his eyes, snarking, “Christ, that’s not what I said. Not even I wanna work for Talon -”

“Then why the hell are you?”

Her deep, dark eyes flash purple with the glow of the sun, the tarnished, burnished stranded lighting, and the radiance of her biopanels.

Reaper stares her down, before -

He sees her with scissors in her hand and a strange, sly smile on her face and a surprisingly gentle glint to her yellow eyes as they talk about “dead” husbands.

“She has her assignments for later this month, but for now, her handler wants to focus on her training -”

He sees Talon agents knocked back by sonic rockets and no, he doesn’t care, he isn’t worried, but they have to win, or they’ll all die and -

The man with shadows sinking around his eyes gives him a wry grin as he finishes the cup of tea, chuckling, “The Devil would have picked the wine -”

He sees the lone figure - mask of black and burning red - standing on the staircase by a yellow bell tower, heavy pulse rifle in hand, his seadeep voice cracking as he wills himself to fight, fight everything, fight even his partner in everything and -

“You never came home.”

And then the memories fall apart into a blast of white light and horrifying heat and -

“...I have my reasons,” he tells her cryptically. Sombra glares at him intensely before asking with a
soft, vicious whisper, “Will you ever tell me those?”

“...You focus on your personal agenda, and I’ll focus on mine,” he tells her, “When yours is
done...then you’ll learn mine. And you won’t work for Talon. Well, they’ll probably have to like,
contract you out or something. It’s bullshit. I only got this shit explained to me a few days ago. But
you work for me. Or we’re allies or partners or some sort of weirdass merc tag-team duo or
something. I don’t really care - you want 60% of the pay, fine, take it.”

Reaper glances at her again, smug grin dripping with every word:

“I only want answers. You with me?”

Sombra’s eyes search his mask, before she asks slowly, “You… trust me that much?”

Oh hell no.

I haven’t trusted anything for like six or seven years now.

“The only things I trust are my shotguns,” he cracks wryly and that gets a deadpan expression out of
her, but he chuckles, adding, “And I trust that our mutual interests will be enough to get us further
together than us working separately.”

“...You don’t even know my full agenda,” Sombra states coolly but Reaper -

“You want to find the people who ordered the death penalty on Overwatch.”

The look of shock on her face is so worth it.

Reaper laughs lowly, his words are smoky and bittersweet and dark, “In my… professional opinion,
Overwatch was in its death throes anyways, but it didn’t…it didn’t deserve to die the way it did.”

He thinks of an eye of blue, surrounded by shards of red.

...We didn’t deserve to die the way we did.

Behind the mask, he scowls to himself darkly, assessing the strange, almost surreal emotion settling
around his slowly beating heart. It...almost feels like a pang, an ache, a bittersweet surge.

...Something is still alive there -

A glimmer of blue surrounded by red and gold and amber flames

Beating slowly, with life struggling to breathe

Mere inches below where Jack’s metal names shift against Reaper’s sternum.

And there is a dangerous question that pulses slowly with the beat -

...Did we actually die?

Sombra is watching him closely, but her gaze isn’t critical - it’s gentle, calm - and Reaper sighs,
flicking his gaze over the crowd, muttering in a cracked, smoky tone, “Overwatch died a horrific
death, and took me along with it. Took everything from me with a god damn explosion. I have
nothing left.”

Reaper tilts his mask towards her, his voice caught between the fury of shattering heartbreak and the
rage of bitter, charred pain:

“All I’ve got now is revenge.”

He doesn’t even have his name.

The name on the dog tags around his neck belong to another -

But he doesn’t have him either.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about the lackey that planted that explosive under my feet,” Reaper continues, every word is the pressure-flaking of an obsidian knife taking shape, “I want the one who gave him the order. I want that motherfucker’s head on a silver platter, served with a side of soup and salad. I wanna Godfather that shit, horse’s head and all.

“I gotta live through this bitter hell, but I’ll drag every single one of them with me to the Ninth Circle until Satan can consume us all together.”

Sombra assesses him, before she grins like a skull:

“Sounds like fun.”

“I figured you’d be game,” Reaper smirks back but she mutters, “But we still get to fight people, right?”

“What kinda revenge renegade asshole do you take me for? *Fuckin’ of course* we get to fight people. Only thing really worth doing anymore anyways,” the merc huffs rather indignantly. The crowd around them is thinning out slightly, but there are still so many people, so many bodies, so many small souls flickering with life. They watch the crowd for a moment before Sombra whispers lowly:

“...Is the soldier one of them?”

“...He’s the first one I’m taking with me,” Reaper states with the ice of the Ninth Circle in his voice, “...If he doesn’t follow me every step of the way.”

*As Jack would.*

“...I don’t understand,” the hacker murmurs, “You sounded so… You sounded like you respected him.”

Stained glass, stardust shards shred the inside of his lungs.

A blue eye surrounded by red upon red upon broken glass.

The heaviest name, hanging from a ball chain around his neck.

“...I have a lot of respect for what he once was,” Reaper says slowly, staring at a strand of threaded bell lights above their heads. In his limited peripherals, he sees Sombra tilt her head towards him, asking quietly, “And that was…?”

A smile pressed into his palm, in a room of whitegold light, tinted blue at the edges.

Laughter outside of a massive, stately administrative building, as the sun began to burn away the morning mist.
A hand in his, fingers interwoven on the morning when the sun never rose, when there were only screams in the room and living guns on the television.

A head of gold-blonde hair on his chest, most mornings, in the bronze-painted rosette lighting of 5 a.m.

A smirk that is strong and soft, gentle and playful, confident and brilliant, surrounded by pictures of their favorite places, lit with the fire of building a new world order, of creating their empire together.

His name “Gabriel,” which he gave him, in dog tags, in a tattoo on his wrist with the number 127, in their favorite restaurant one chill September evening, in honeysweet whispers and nightfell laughter in blue stardust darkness.

...When he was Jack.

Just Jack.

“...When he knew who he was,” the reaper says slowly, each word is the roll of an ocean tide in his throat, each word is weighted with an existence he cannot place, “When he knew what he was made for.”

In his peripherals, Sombra gives him a look of abject confusion.

“...the hell kinda answer is that?” she asks and Reaper snaps a glare at her, growling, “I don’t have to explain myself to you -”

I can’t begin to explain to you what he was.

“Now hurry the fuck up and find something to eat,” the mercenary grumbles, turning slightly to his right as he takes a step, “I don’t want to be in this plaza anymore - OOMPH.”

Something slams into him at rib height and it makes a small “AH” noise before he processes what it is -

OH SHIT.

And the girl falls backwards onto the cobbled street, awkwardly clutching a bag labeled “azúcar” to her chest, her braids bouncing slightly as she smacks against the smoothed stone. She winces in pain and -

“Oh fuckfuckfuck, shit, fuck, ¿estás bien?” Reaper stammers as Sombra pushes past him, hissing, “Stop swearing! ¿Todos bien, muchach-? - oh! Alejandra!”

The girl glances up at them, before blinking in surprise at Sombra and then -

She gives a weird, confused look to Reaper’s mariachi mask.

Sombra glances back at him, before chuckling. “No te preocupes, Ale. Aquí - dejame ayudar a levantarte (tn: Don’t worry, Ale. Here - let me give you help up).” She offers the girl - Alejandra - a hand, as the girl responds, “Gracias.”

“Lo siento - mi culpa,” Reaper apologizes to her but Alejandra just gives him a skeptical look before saying, “...¿Dónde está su grupo (tn: where is your band)?”

Reaper thinks something in his mind snaps.
Sombra chortles, “Dios mio - él los perdió (tn: my god - he lost them).” Alejandra continues to give him that suspicious stare, asking slowly, “¿Todos usan máscaras raras también (tn: do all of them also wear weird masks)?”

Sombra howls with laughter as Reaper growls, “...Tú pequeña mierd-”

“Reaper!” Sombra snaps at him mid-laugh, tears still leaking out of her eyes, and the mercenary bites his tongue, even as Alejandra grins mischievously and that little -

“¿No es difícil a cantar con una máscara (tn: is it not difficult to sing with a mask)?” Alejandra asks wryly and Reaper grumbles at her, “No me hago demostrar lo contrario (tn: don’t make me prove you wrong).” The girl just giggles before darting around them, hefting the bag of sugar in her arms before she waves to Sombra, saying, “Hasta luego!” and disappearing into the crowd. They watch her briefly reappear by a tall, white-haired man with his back to them, wearing a grey hoodie in Mexico in fucking July like an asshole, holding a massive bag of flour over one shoulder and -

Reaper squints against the sunlight but -

“Alright, over here they have good sandwiches,” Sombra says, snapping him out of it, smacking his arm lightly and she turns towards the fish stand.

Reaper sighs, giving one last glance to the street where Alejandra had met up with the man but -

Trick of the light or something.

And he follows Sombra to the fish seller.

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I found myself, found myself amongst the thorns and weeds.

You found yourself, found yourself amongst the beautiful trees.

We're not the same - no, we're not the same.

We're not the same - no, we're not the same.

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Soldado: The End of the Beginning

Saturday, July 10, 2076: 10:22 a.m. - on Avenue de la Misión, leaving the Mercado plaza, Dorado, Mexico

“...You alright?” 76 asks her as Alejandra catches up to his side - he had just barely seen her bump into that lone mariachi guitarist asshole, but at least she’d sprung right back up and rejoined him. Alejandra grins at him cheerfully, saying, “Yup! It wasn’t a bad fall. He just startled me.”

“Yeah, I can see why,” 76 says dryly as they continue to descend under the pedestrian bridge, and the soldier shifts the industrial size bag of flour uncomfortably, trying to keep the carton of eggs
steady in his other hand, apologizing, “Sorry for getting so far ahead of you - I just… I was thinking.”

“About what?” Alejandra asks him as they make the left turn down the street, avoiding a red truck that drives by.  76 -

He knows.

He’s been thinking of red upon red upon hellfire eyes, set into the obsidian shadows of a pale mask of bone.

He’s been thinking of claws cracking into the screenglass of his tactical visor.

He’s been thinking of -

“I don’t believe in anything since you left me to rot in this fucked up world all alone.”

Gabriel truly believed that he’d left him behind.

Had he left?

Had he tried?

Had he really tried to understand?

...The last two years of Overwatch were a blur in his head - first Gérard, and then Amélie, and then the leaks, the inquiries, the Blackwatch suspension. Null Sector and the push to defy orders and do what was right. The possibility of his being court-martialed, thinly veiled threats from ambassadors and higher-ups, muttered whispers about “things that could happen to Gabriel, or Ana, or Reinhardt, or Torbjörn.”

The harrowing arrest of Ogundimu, watching with horror as Genji’s body struggled to rise, sparks snapping, as Lena blurred in and out of time itself - Gabriel next to him in the situation room, his hands almost breaking the console desk, as Winston roared with pain and anguish and fury -

And then -

“Disengage, Ana - that’d an orld-”

Ana.

Reinhardt “retired.”

Genji left.

And then Jesse.

Torbjörn was almost never around - 76 didn’t blame him. Spending time with his family must have been infinitely preferable to standing in a burning house collapsing in on itself.

Angela almost never left her hospital in those days - without her friends, she never seemed motivated to set foot in the Geneva base.

76 didn’t blame her.

Winston never left Watchpoint: Gibraltar, stubbornly continuing to build and create things, as if his
refusal of the situation could force it to change. Lena stayed with him, but “Commander Morrison” could only put them on so many more missions before

Before

...

Gabriel had slipped.

Gabriel had fallen.

Gabriel had ended up in the dark corners of his mind that he was often pulled into when stressed to the point of breaking, where his limits and boundaries broke down and fell to pieces and where Jack -

Where he couldn’t follow.

Where he couldn’t see in the blinding darkness of the blazing sun.

Where Gabriel’s light was so bright that it burned both of them.

First had been the trying-but-failing discussions, then arguments, then chilled silence, then more arguments, then

A knife made of obsidian

A palm with the skin cut away, but the shadows weaving in to replace it

And Gabriel whispering painfully, so painfully

“I don’t need a Strike-Commander or a hero or a defender - I just need you, but you left -”

Had they both really tried?

...Could they still try?

He doesn’t know

He doesn’t know

He doesn’t know

But still.

He knows.

He knows he is going to try anyways.

“...What Pokemon I’m gonna raise next,” he says slowly but Alejandra gives him a hard assessment, muttering, “You don’t have to lie to me.”

“...I can’t really tell you the truth, kid,” 76 attempts to explain, “It’s not your responsibility to bear.” They’re trudging past the ground-level arches where she’d been hiding only a few hours ago, moving down the road to the familiar red-orange building by the cliff. The girl pouts slightly, “Everyone keeps treating me like a child.”

“...You shouldn’t be in such a rush to grow up,” 76 mutters quietly, “Life won’t slow down for you
once it happens.”

Alejandra scowls fiercely, grumbling, “And I thought you were cool…”

“Oh, kiddo,” 76 laughs at that, “I ain’t been cool a day in my life.” The look she gives him is skeptical of this claim, and the soldier just rambles, “Listen - no adult is cool. We’re all just lying to you. Adulthood is boring as shit.”

They pause briefly outside the bakery doors and he grins at her, saying, “Don’t tell your mom I said that.” Alejandra makes an unimpressed face, asking tartly, “How come you get to swear and I don’t?”

“Literally the only perk to being an adult -” 76 starts to say and her eyes brighten mischievously as she wonders, “So I can swear all the time when I’m older?”

“...I mean… you can,” 76 answers contemplatively, “...It does make you a massive jerk, though.”

“Then what does that make you?” she retorts and he just smirks, “A massive jerk - I just said that.” Alejandra rolls her eyes, pulling the door open. Inside, Silvia is sitting at one of the customer tables, reading the paper - she sets it down when they enter, rising from her seat.

“Here,” she says, opening the latch to the counter door, and 76 slides himself through. He waits for a moment for the mother and daughter to enter the kitchen first, then follows them in, and Silvia points to a corner. 76 first puts the eggs on the long kitchen table in the center of the room. As Alejandra puts the bag of sugar beside them, 76 flops the massive bag of flour in the corner and -

A puff of it blooms in the air and practically smacks him in the face.

“Shit,” he hisses, pulling away as he wipes at his eyes, and he hears Silvia snap, “Manners!” as Alejandra giggles and snorts over his clumsiness. 76 glances at his hands and sleeves, covered in flour, making a frustrated face with his own damn self before sighing, “I’ll go clean up.”

He leaves the kitchen, listening to the baker and her assistant chatter to each other in low volumes, and heads up the stairs on the right. He makes his way into the restroom again, cleaning his face and hands before he moves down the second story hallway to the spare room.

Silvia has been far too kind to him.

After he’d patched up the worst wounds and made sure the coast was clear, he’d rushed back to his room, quickly straightening up and dumping everything into the bags he’d brought. In the early hours of the morning, when the light was pastel painted over bronze, he’d brought his stuff back to the bakery, and Silvia had let him drop it in the spare room for the day, so he could “do his grounded chores” before leaving straight for the train at 5 p.m.

He is not worthy of such generosity.

76 enters the spare bedroom, slowly shutting the door behind him. He unzips the grey hoodie, pulling it into his hands and looking at it contemplatively.

He does not know.

He does not know which of them it belonged to.

The concept of “yours” and “mine” hadn’t existed between them for years.
Maybe decades.

He does not know if it even really exists now, because even as they had fought and battled and scarred each other last night, there had been that...inescapable pull towards each other, electric touches of raw emotion and burning power they had always felt in each other.

Different and yet

Somehow the same.

...Could they still try?

His wrists ache, and he tilts the left one towards himself, looking at the stale ink there - decades old at this point, stretched and faded, the text a little warped but still legible:

[24: Gabriel Reyes]

Does Gabriel’s left wrist still bear his name too?

Has it faded with whatever happened to him?

...Jack scowls.

What had happened to him?

...Someone has an answer somewhere, he thinks, the thought both weighted and airy, heavy and light. It gives him a clarity of focus, an edge that is both hard and soft, and he chucks the sweatshirt into his duffel bag, rummaging around for a different hoodie, of a slightly different shade of grey or black or blue.

...I don’t know what’s going on, Gabriel, he thinks, pulling out a black hoodie with AC/DC printed on it. He starts to shrug it on, his thoughts moving ahead of him, I won’t know unless you tell me, unless you try to meet me halfway. Maybe you never will. Maybe I don’t deserve that. But I’m not giving up.

Fuck giving up.

Fuck letting your - wait shit I’m working with flour, I should wear something white.

His fingers are slow to pull the black sweatshirt off, and he starts searching around for his single white sweater, his hands bumping every so often against the heavy pulse rifle nestled in the bag, and -

...Fuck letting your anger claim me - claim us both, Jack decides, before realizing his hand has stopped on the heavy pulse rifle, I’m going to keep at this. I’m going to keep trying.

If I gotta wade through rivers of blood, if I gotta fight off demons, if I gotta enter whatever fucked up hellscape your mind lives in these days to find whatever pieces of you are left

Then I will.

His eyes are seeing the heavy pulse rifle, nested amid the only clothes he’s brought with him on whatever revenge renegade journey his dumb ass had started four months ago, all of them settled in an aged leather and combat-kevlar duffel, but his mind is seeing -

Claws cracking the tactical visor
Claws around his neck
Claws strangling his heart
Claws shredding the inside of his lungs

His right hand is instinctively touching the small wounds around his right eye, the scabs and the ragged skin, held together with bandages and nanoboosters and eventually scars.

His mind is seeing eyes of red upon red upon hellfire -

*But I’m not doing this now,* the soldier thinks to himself, thinks to the other half of him somewhere in the city, yet a world away, *I’m not ready. You’re not ready.*

*And it took a hard lesson to learn this. To admit this to myself. To us both.*

*But I know.*

*I know.*

*I can’t make this better when I’m not better* -

His left hand has somehow found the tactical visor, wrapped in layers of butcher paper to cover the jagged screeenglass edges.

*when I can’t even fix myself.*

It took losing his enhanced sight to learn, to see -

*But I see that now.*

The soldier turns the visor over in his hands, wonders if the mask was all Gabriel had seen too.

Just as all he had seen had been the pale skull.

*You had to break my limits for me to see that. See that we aren’t ready. See that fixing whatever this is, whatever is left of us - it won’t happen even if I try. Because we won’t see each other like this.*

Jack thinks of a pale skull mask.

He thinks of red upon red upon hellfire eyes surrounded by shadows and bone.

He thinks of a voice that cracks like the earth under pressure.

He thinks of the anger and the anguish that had laced every word that voice had said last night.

*I don’t want to leave.*

*I don’t want to leave you in pain*

*but I have to.*

*I have to fix myself before I can try fixing us both.*

He sighs, still shifting the broken, useless, ugly tactical visor in his hands, still thinking hard lessons that are long and dark and full of shadows, but he
He thinks he might see the smallest flakes of gold in the seams.

...There are still people in this world worth fighting for. And they come before me, before even you, before both of us. They don’t deserve to carry the struggle of our crosses - our burdens are yours and mine alone.

But now

76 scowls bitterly, thinking old broken useless ugly thoughts, aching with the weight of forgotten priorities, cracked promises, unyielding paradigms:

But here they stand, in the ashes and dust of our empire, fighting wars that we were supposed to have prevented.

You asked what good we did, Gabriel. You said the world should have burned without us.

But you’re wrong.

I helped deactivate a fucking fusion bomb - with Jesse and Sombra of all people. I have dealt a terrible blow to a criminal arms trade network. I have learned of revolutionaries who speak out with music and spirit. And even if you have driven me from this city -

I have helped inspire someone.

And those -

Those are worth the weight of the world.

A single drop in the ocean is worth the whole of the ocean, for every drop causes a ripple.

You were always the one who said that there are no coincidences -

There are only connections between larger forces we cannot yet perceive.

I am going to find those, Gabriel.

I am going to find the ones who cast the net that dragged us down.

And then

I am going to cut their hearts out

And offer them to you

Until I can help you fix yours

In whatever small ways I can.

His right fingers are gingerly tracing the name on his left wrist, even as his thoughts churn and storm like a hurricane over the sea, even as the lightning pulses flash fire and flood in his veins.

This war is never over. I am slow to join the fray. And I have no fucking idea if you will ever come back and fight too.

But the war goes on, Gabriel

And maybe this time...
Jack pauses. He gingerly puts a finger on a sharp edge of the screenglass, just light enough not to cut, but hard enough to feel the thin razor line tense against the raised texture of his fingerprint.

He could cut it easily.

But somehow

He does not want to.

*Maybe this time… you will be the one to follow my lead.*

His hands are not idle.

They have a purpose.

*Maybe then, you will listen to and actually accept my apologies. Maybe then, you will be ready to give me yours as well.*

*But until then…*

His hands are worth something.

His hands can still make things, can still build and construct.

His hands built this visor

And his hands will fix it too.

*Until then… all I can do is keep fighting.*

*All I can do is keep trying.*

He stares at the white sweater in the bag as a thought turns over inside him, like the roll of an ocean tide and -

*…Vishkar would have screenglass.*

*…Vishkar would have the highest quality screenglass.*

And besides

He owes Sanjay Korp a fucking punch to the face.

And he wants to hear one of Lúcio’s protest concerts live.

Jack smirks to himself when -

*Wait, if I’m just gonna get covered in flour, then I should just wear the grey hoodie.*

He stuffs the white sweater back into the bag and pulls out the flour-coated grey hoodie again, pulling his arms back through the sleeves. He rewraps the broken tactical visor in the butcher paper, settling it into the bag, smiling as he thinks:

*You might need to wait a little while, bud -*

*But don’t worry.*
I'm gonna fix you.

---------

Cause I gotta blow like the wind, flow like the sea

Deep down inside of every part of me.

My heart's been aching for the freedom to stretch out my wings.

Now with every move I make and every breath I take,

my mind's been worrying about what's at stake,

but I just gotta let them go with the wind.

Oh, let it all go, let it all go

Let it all go with the wind.

Let it all go, let it all go

Let it all go.

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Segador y Soldado: Nuevo Comienzo (del Fin)

Saturday, July 10, 2076: 04:23 p.m. - the Panadería Las Nieblas in Dorado, Mexico

Alejandra watches him drop the battered pieces of old bread into the sizzling oil and both the soldado and soldaderita pull back when the egg-milk-sugar pops and fizzes in the heat.

“...Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” the girl asks 76 skeptically. He gives her a look of half-feigned, half-genuine hurt, saying rather slowly, “I haven’t made them in a while but you gotta trust me on this.”

Alejandra makes a face of further doubt, muttering, “But it uses old bread.”

“Hey - nothing wrong with old things now,” he snaps back as Silvia snorts behind them. The baker is pulling out the last batch of buñuelos and corbatas for the evening, setting the still-warm dessert rolls onto different plates. When she had finished the buñuelos, 76 had asked if he could use the remaining cinnamon, sugar, eggs, and oil to make them one of the like five treats he actually knew how to make. Silvia had shrugged, and 76 had set out making the torrijas. The telera bread from yesterday was actually not quite stiff enough, but it would work.

“...I kinda think I deserve like, seventy-five percent of this,” Reaper growls, and Sombra looks up
from counting the wad of cash to give him a fierce scowl, muttering, “Hey, I sang! I deserve half!” They’re finishing the climb up the cliff staircase from the beach back to the town proper, just south of the Mission. The climb isn’t hard, it’s just made difficult by the sheer number of tourists and beachgoers trying to jam their way down the stairs, and Reaper and Sombra have to fight their way against the current of the crowd, like salmon swimming upstream.

“...And you say this is an actual thing real people eat?” Alejandra continues to question him, as her mother heads back out into the main storeroom. They can’t really see the bakery floor - the angle of the door and the slight overlap of the stairs makes it difficult to see anything more than the southeastern corner of the shop, and Silvia rapidly disappears from view as she heads to the main shelves on the other side of the room.

(“I had to teach you the words!” Reaper snaps as they make their way into the public, accessible parts of La Misión de las Campanas, weaving through more tourists, open air hallways, and cactus garden courtyards. Reaper starts counting them off on his fingers, grumbling, “Didn’t know the words to Hotel California, didn’t know the words to Desperado, I had to fucking teach you Santeria, Dani California, and Amber -”)

“Listen, I can tell you people in Spain and Gibraltar eat this all the time,” 76 chuckles, “And it’s delicious. Do you know who Gabriel is?”

Was. Should have used was -

“Um, he was the commander of the Strike team, right?” Alejandra answers, “We learned about him in class. He was commander of Blackwatch too, right? My teacher says they framed him.”

(“How was I supposed to know them?” Sombra retorts, “These songs are like one-hundred years old, amigo. And they’re not real mariachi!” Reaper points a finger at her as they exit the front of the Mission, heading up the street, muttering, “Listen, if you wanna rip off the tourists, you gotta know this kinda shit. Plus you should just know the classics anyways! Who the hell doesn’t know Back in Black?”)

“...Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” 76 mutters dryly, before trying to steer his thoughts back to a happier course, adding brightly, “His mother’s mother came from Spain - he said she would make these all the time for him. He taught me the recipe first, way back when - god, that must’ve been like...thirty-three, thirty-four years ago?”

“...Viejo,” Alejandra retorts and 76 gives her an aghast look, before fishing the pieces out with some pincers. The girl laughs at his face, adding, “Old bread and old hero!”

(“That one is rock and roll!” Sombra shouts with increasing frustration, drawing startled looks from more passersby as they make their way to the orange bakery. Reaper practically ruins his remaining vocal chords, yelling back, “IT’S A CLASSIC, YOU IGNORANT LITTLE -”)

“Sounds like someone isn’t getting any dessert,” 76 grumbles, adding in more pieces and then sprinkling more cinnamon and sugar on the finished ones, letting them cool for a moment. Alejandra gives the torrijas a suspicious look before the soldier chuckles, egging her on, “You know you wanna try one…”

“...Just one,” she admits and he grins, his eyes flashing mischievously as he says, “Careful, they’re hot.”

(“Whatever - I sang, so you’re still buying me dessert,” Sombra states, holding out half of the stack of mixed pesos, dollars, and euros. Reaper snatches it with a low threatening mutter of, “The only
one you knew was Bésame Mucho and like half the lyrics at that!” Sombra flashes a wicked grin at him, saying slyly, “Well, yeah, that one’s a classic.”

Alejandra pulls at one gingerly, blowing on it slightly before taking a bite. 76 watches her slowly process the taste before -

Her eyes widen up in sheer, surprised delight.

“...Mamá!” she shouts with joy, darting out of the kitchen as 76 laughs, he turns his attention to pulling out more of the torrijas, adding new ones in with a loud sizzle that fills the room -

(“I am already regretting everything about this partnership,” Reaper complains as Sombra laughs loudly, saying, “Do you smell that? Silvia’s buñuelos are the best!”)

(“Alright, I take offense to that,” he mutters, “We’re gonna have to have a cook-off or something -”)

“You need to try, Mamá,” Alejandra says, bolting into the main bakery room - there are a few patrons sitting around the tables, as Silvia rearranges some of the baskets and display plates on the shelves, pulling the empty ones and slotting in the new trays. The girl swings open the counter door, rushing over to her mother as -

The green door jangles open as two newcomers enter the bakery, the shorter, sportier one giggling, “Are you gonna do it in that outfit too?”

“I’ll do it with one hand tied behind my back,” the tall mariachi guitarist threatens and Sombra rolls her eyes, turning a bright smile to the baker and her daughter. Silvia looks up, munching something as she waves at them and Alejandra turns to smile to Sombra -

But her expression drops when she sees Reaper.

“Oh… el mariachi raro (tn: the weird mariachi),” the girl says and the mercenary snaps a finger towards her, growling, “Oye aqui, punkita -”

“...Is that a real word?” Sombra asks him lowly and he mutters, “I don’t even know, but I’m making it one.” Silvia lightly pats the side of her daughter’s head, whispering loudly, “No seas grosera, mija (tn: don’t be rude, my daughter),” before adding brightly, “Bienvenido. ¿Quieres lo usual (tn: Welcome - want the usual)?”

(In the kitchen, 76 barely hears the soft rumbling conversations of new customers as he pulls the last few slices from the pan of hot oil and adds them to the plate. And for the first time in years, he finds himself humming low to the sunlight, tinted blue at the edges:

(“Somewhere...beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me -”)

(“Sí,” Sombra states cheerfully, and Silvia grabs a small paper bag from the counter and begins pulling some of the buñuelos from the tray. The hacker and mariachi guitarist squeeze their way around the tables, as Sombra adds, “¿Puedes darme algunos más, Silvia? Mi amigo quiere los (tn: Can you me some more, Silvia? My friend wants them).”

“¿Aparte (tn: separate)?” the baker asks as Reaper grumbles, “I never asked for these -”

“Sí, Silvia. And it’s my treat,” Sombra says, before chuckling, “Well...your treat.”

“You rude li’l shit,” the mercenary growls as Alejandra slinks up to Sombra, grinning as she rips off a piece of whatever’s in her hand -
"- My lover stands on golden sands - and watches the ships that go sailing," the soldier sings lightly as he moves through the kitchen, dumping some of the used dishes and pans into the sink with a steady clatter. He turns the faucet and begins to fill one side of the sink with hot water, staring out the eastern window to the blue upon blue upon blue -)

¿Quieres probar algo (tn: want to try some)?” the girl asks as Sombra takes the piece, looking it over before popping it in her mouth. She chews for a second before saying happily, “Sabroso! ¿Qué es (tn: delicious - what is it)?”

“Una torrija!” Alejandra replies cheerfully and Reaper scowls, asking, “Aquellos son de España, ¿sí (tn: those are from Spain, yeah)?”

“Sí! Espere - te traeré algo más (tn: Yes! Wait, I’ll get your some more)!” the girl says happily before rushing off back into the kitchen. Silvia sighs, moving back around behind the counter with their bags, explaining, “El hermano de mi esposo está aquí - está haciendo para nos (tn: the brother of my spouse is here - he’s making them for us).”

(“Somewhere, beyond the sea, he’s there, watching for me -” 76 says as he starts scrubbing some of the dishes when Alejandra skids back in. He glances at her in mild surprise as she asks with vivid delight, gesturing to the torrijas, “Can I give some to my friend?”)

“Ah, qué casualidad (tn: what a coincidence).” Sombra says to Silvia as she puts the price into the older register. The hacker smiles, continuing, “Mi amigo aquí solo estaba diciendo que él puede hacer los mejores postres (tn: my friend here was just saying that he can make better desserts).”

Silvia turns a slightly suspicious eye to Reaper and his mask, saying politely, “¿Así es eso (tn: is that so)?”

(“They’re yours so you can give ‘em to whoever you want,” he says with a smile and a shrug, before asking, “Who’s your friend?” Alejandra gives him a wide grin as she snatches a few off the tray, explaining, “She’s awesome! She downloads all the old Pokemon games for me - you should meet her sometime! I think you’d like her.”)

“¿Piensa que tú puedes hacer mejor que él (tn: think you can make them better than him)?” Sombra asks Reaper with a smug smirk and the mercenary grumbles loudly, “Tienes que cerrar la boca, amiga (tn: you need to be quiet, friend).” He pulls out the amount for the desserts and hands it over to Silvia, while continuing to mutter, “...Pero yo puedo enfrentarlo (tn: ...but I could take him on).”

(“That depends,” 76 smirks wryly, “What’s her favorite starter? I can’t be friends with anyone who hates on my favorites.” Alejandra rolls her eyes before whipping around and heading back out onto the sales floor.)

“Dios mío, todos es una pelea para tu (tn: my god, everything is always fighting for you).” Sombra mutters sourly as Silvia chuckles. Her daughter returns from the kitchen, carrying four torrijas. Alejandra stuffs two in each bag, humming, “Dos para mi amiga… y dos para el mariachi raro (tn: for for my friend...and two for the weird mariachi)!”

“¿Qué dije sobre ser grosera(tn: what did I say about being rude)?” the baker demands to her daughter but Sombra just snorts, “Bien… si ella dice la verdad… (tn: well...if she says the truth).”

(“...If I could fly like birds on high - then straight to his arms I’d go sailing,” 76 continues, listening to the water run, the clanking of the dishes together, the indistinct chatter coming in from the front of the shop, enjoying the sunlight that filters in across his face - whitegold with reflections of blue upon blue at the edges.)
“No necesito esto ahora mismo (tn: I do not need this right now),” Reaper complains as Sombra and Alejandra just giggle and Silvia cracks a wry smile, yet even he chuckles slightly and -

(For a moment -)

For a brief, almost imperceptible moment -

(He thinks he can hear Gabriel’s low, smug, smoky laughter from somewhere beyond the blue upon blue upon blue as he hums to the sunlight, “It’s far, beyond the stars - it’s near, beyond the moon -”)

He thinks he can hear the echoes of Jack’s slow, sweet summer storm voice in the cracks between the laughter and the sunlight.

(“- I know, beyond a doubt, my heart will lead me there soon -”)

“Necesitamos irnos (tn: we need to go),” Reaper sighs, grabbing his bag of buñuelos and torrijas, fighting off the stained glass shadows in his mind, before adding, “Tengo que tomar el tren (tn: I have to make the train).”

(In the kitchen, 76 sets several of the dishes out to dry, letting the greasy, soapy water drain as he says to the sea quietly, “We’ll meet, beyond the shore - we’ll kiss just as before - happy we’ll be, beyond the sea -”)

¿Va a buscar a tu grupo perdido (tn: Going to find your lost band)?” Alejandra taunts him and he tilts his head towards her, growling, “Tendré que volver a cantar y demostrar tu contrario algún día (tn: I have to return to sing and prove you wrong some day).”

“Venga (tn: fight me),” Alejandra says fiercely which causes Silvia to drop her head in her hands as Reaper chuckles smugly. Sombra sighs, tugging at his sleeve, muttering, “Bien, bien, vámonos, vámonos (tn: alright, alright, let’s go, let’s go).” They turn to go and make their way through the tables to the door. Reaper shoves his way out as Sombra turns to wave and then they make a right and head up the street to the Mercado plaza.

“- And never again, I’ll go sailing,” 76 sings softly as he steps out of the kitchen as the green entrance door swings shut. The mother and daughter look up, with Alejandra whining slightly, “Aw, you just missed them. It was that weird mariachi guy from before!”

“Oh yeah?” he asks with a grin, “Think if I run after them I can get him to play a song for me?”

“Bribe him with torrijas!” the girl nods sagely as her mother laughs lightly, but the soldier just shrugs, smiling, “The torrijas are for you two. They’re not proper thanks but they’re all I can really make at the moment -”

“No te preocupes,” Silvia says, waving him off, “You helped us a lot today. I am surprised you know how to make pan de elote.”

“Basically the only other dish I’m good at making,” 76 admits, turning to the stairs, “Only good part about growing up on a corn farm.”

(“This torrija is pretty good,” Sombra says in between bites as they work their way across the plaza, once again pushing through crowds and molasses-slow tourists. Reaper just snorts, “Listen, the best torrijas were made by mi abuela, okay? This jackass got nothing on her.”)

“You aren’t gonna go after them?” Alejandra asks with some confusion and the soldier sighs, “Sorry, I gotta get going. You up for a run to the train station?”
“Oh, yeah! Let me get my sneakers,” she laughs excitedly, darting past him on the stairs and rushing to the second story. 76 sighs with a smirk, following at a more leisurely pace. He crosses the landing and heads to the spare bedroom. He pulls off the flour-splattered hoodie and grabs a blue one instead, tugging it over his head. He winces slightly as the fabric brushes across his bruised cheek, but it settles on his frame just fine. He leans down to zipper up the duffel and slings it over his shoulder.

(“What is with you and insulting people?” Sombra asks tartly, licking the extra sugar off her fingers. Reaper rolls his eyes, growling, “I don’t insult people when they don’t deserve it.” She stares at him pointedly sighing, “You just insulted some random man who made us treats and you’ve never even met the guy. You haven’t even tried the torrija!”)

(“Alright, look, in an effort to be fair, I’ll eat one on the train and message you with my assessment,” Reaper relents, sighing, “Does that work for you?” Sombra just laughs, “I can’t wait to screenshot it the moment you admit you were wrong.”)

Reaching for his smaller bag, 76 pauses and -

Slowly, he pulls out some of the remaining American dollars he still has -

“...Don’t you dare.”

76 flinches slightly, twisting around to face Silvia. She leans against the doorframe, and the cool gaze from last night has returned to her eyes, along with a critical pout.

“...I - nothing will ever express how sorry I am, but -” he starts to say quietly, but she holds up a hand, a grimace crossing her face as she mutters, “Even so, money is absolutely not the way to do it. I do not know where it came from or how you acquired it. I do not want it.”

“...I am sorry. I did not mean for the gesture to be shallow,” he sighs, wishing he could just remember how to be, how he used to do this so easily, so genuinely, and while his intentions now are still true, he struggles - oh how he struggles - to convey them.

“...I do not agree with your methods,” Silvia tells him fiercely, “But Los Muertos has been a burden on this city. If you have taught them a hard lesson, then perhaps... well, then perhaps someday I will understand.”

But her face softens, as she glances down the hall towards Alejandra’s room, murmuring gently, “Even if...even if I am mad, you have given her something to believe in. And today, you did work hard.”

76 watches her, with the roll of the ocean’s tide flooding his chest. Silvia gives him a small, patient, trying smile as she says, “These two things. They are worth more than any amount of money.”

“...You are far too kind,” the old soldier replies, his voice cracking slightly under the airy weight of her words. He inhale-exhales, whispering, “I do not deserve this from you. From anyone here.”

“...Perhaps not,” Silvia says gently, “But as I tell her: if you keep trying to do the right thing, then one day...maybe you will.”

76 knows.

His heart burns with the ache of time and bloodstream memories, of claws squeezing his soul and broken glass around his eye.
“...You still mean something to many people,” her words weigh, “And if you break her heart the way the corruption charges against Overwatch broke mine, I will never forgive you.”

He knows.

He stares at her eyes, her resolute expression, lit with whitegold sunlight touched blue at the edges, and he says slowly:

“All I can say is that I will try to do better.”

“...You will need to do better than ‘try,’” she states to him and he smiles at her sadly, admitting, “I know. But when I crash and burn again, it will only hurt worse if I have told you that instead.”

“Then the solution is not to crash and burn,” Silvia smirks to him and he laughs with the weight of the years and the shadows in him, as Alejandra darts up to the doorframe from the hallway, asking eagerly, “Ready?”

“Been ready - where you been at?” 76 teases her and she flashes a determined look before bolting down the stairs. He stuffs the cash back in the small bag, and Silvia steps out the door to let him pass. He heads to the landing and then turns to her, giving her a smile that is as true and as genuine as his bisected, broken-and-resealed face can ever make, saying:

“Thank you. De veras.”


(They’re working their way up the winding streets, Sombra still munching away on her sweets, Reaper complaining even as he carries the bag in one hand. Things are relatively tranquil, until the hacker asks, “If you could play any song right now, what would you pick?”)

The soldier meets up with the soldaderita outside, and the two set off at a fairly quick pace, moving into the Mercado plaza, maneuvering around crowds and tourists, heading east-northeast towards the train station.

(The mercenary seems contemplative before he mutters, “...I can’t sing very well.” Sombra shrugs, replying, “You don’t gotta sing anything. You don’t even have to play. I was just curious -” but he holds out his bag of sweets to her, and after a pause, she takes it. Reaper slings the guitar on his back around to his hands and -)

“Where are you gonna go next?” Alejandra asks him cheerfully as they leave the plaza and head up towards the government building. 76 inhales-exhales, before saying slowly, “I’m thinking...I might head to Brazil.”

“Why there?”

“Well, we had a few Watchpoints in South America - the big ones were La Paz and Puerto Madryn, but we had a bunch of smaller bases throughout. Rio de Janeiro had one of them, but I don’t know what it’s been turned into since being decommissioned,” he explains. Alejandra gives him a skeptical squint before asking, “So...you’re just gonna go visit old bases?”

“Sure,” 76 chuckles and she rolls her eyes, muttering, “Lying to me again.”

“I really can’t tell you the truth this time, kid,” he laughs darkly because -
"What I really want to do is blow up Vishkar."

(Even as they’re walking, Reaper starts to strum a tune and after a few chords, Sombra says brightly, “Oh, I know this song!”)

(“You know this but you barely know Bésame Mucho?” he asks her as several tourists give them wide glances. She grins at him, saying, “They taught us this one in school, as an English lesson!”)

“Look,” 76 says as the two of them start heading up a hill, “I can send you a postcard or something.”

“Oh wow, a postcard,” Alejandra snarks, rolling her eyes, and the soldier grumbles, “What the hell else would I send you?”

“...I dunno,” she admits, but then beams at him, “Just send me something cool!”

(“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine -” Sombra sings happily in English as Reaper strums along, chuckling to himself. She continues, grinning as they head up the steps of the central train station, people giving them strange, ogling looks, but she sings all the same, “You make me happy when skies are grey!”)

“This is way too heavy a burden for someone as uncool as me to bear,” 76 retorts and Alejandra laughs, “I believe in you! You’re not that uncool.”

“What a confidence booster,” the soldier jokes back and she giggles as they round the corner to the train station.

(“You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you -” Sombra hums as they wander across the tiled building, guided by strands of threaded bell lights and the whitegold glow of the sun to the west. He thinks, distantly, somewhere beyond the sea, he can hear them -)

(The strum of Jesse’s guitar beside his, Jack on his other side, singing in that slow, sweet summer storm voice, singing about grey skies and sunshine, as Ana and Reinhardt and even Torbjörn join in, as Mei pauses in the hallway with a smile, to listen to them all sing about grey skies and sunshine -)

(...I will kill everyone who took that from me, Reaper thinks to himself, even as his fingers play, even as Sombra sings with a lilting tease to her tone, “Please don’t take my sunshine away... Never expected you to pick such a cute song, Gabe.”)

(“Sounds even cuter when I sing it before I kill my enemies,” Reaper cracks darkly, sliding the guitar to his back again. They’re heading to the eastbound platforms, and Sombra gives him a malicious grin as she hands back his bag of pastries, laughing, “What I wouldn’t give to see that.”)

(“You’d be required to tip for the show,” Reaper snaps right back and she snickers, “I’ll pay you in buñuelos and torrijas.”)

76 and Alejandra head to the southbound platform, as she says, “Send me pictures!”

“That’s all you want? I’m not a great photographer - what about a poster instead?” 76 asks and she scowls, thinking it over before saying, “But they’re just so...boring.”

“They’re probably way better looking than what I can get for you,” he admits, as they locate his train. But Alejandra just gives him a bold, determined, fierce smile, saying:

“But I bet yours are gonna be way cooler! I wanna see the inside of a Watchpoint… or the inside of Vishkar.”
“...Should’ve known I couldn’t trick you,” Jack grins back, “You’re quick on the draw.”

(“...Keep me updated on what you find about LumériCo,” Reaper says to her, and Sombra just sighs, “I can’t send stuff to your phone - that’s Talon property. You know they have it bugged.”)

“We learned about a lot of the changes you made to the UN in class,” she says smugly, “So I knew you didn’t like them.” He slumps his bag on the ground, taking a knee to get eye-level with her as he chuckles, “I still don’t like them.”

(“Then send it to me in code or something,” Reaper says offhandedly but her eyes light up in a wicked, brightly-shadowed way and he immediately regrets everything.)

“Will you send me a projector gun?” Alejandra asks eagerly and he snaps a quick glare at her, saying sternly, “Absolutely not... your mother would kill me.”

“...But you thought about it,” she snickers and Jack just rolls his eyes before smiling brightly.

(“Wait no -” Reaper starts to say, but Sombra just cackles, “Too late! Oh man, you started this! How well do you know the Mayan calendar?”)

Jack holds out his fist, saying:

“Thanks for everything, Ale.”

Alejandra returns the wide grin, knocking her fist against his, cheering him on with, “Kick their asses!”

(“Please don’t send me shit based on the Mayan calendar,” Reaper groans, as the announcement system rings out that the eastbound Puebla train and the southbound Veracruz train are ready for boarding. Sombra just smirks, “You wanna play a game, Gabe?”)

“You are definitely not supposed to say that,” Jack laughs, rising to his feet as the automated system declares that his southbound train is boarding. He gives her one last mischievous grin, telling her, “Try to stay out of trouble, okay?”

“No promises,” she laughs back.

(“Don’t give me that Saw shit,” Reaper snaps at her, heading to the train, before adding, “And stop calling me that!” Sombra just gives him her trademark grin before waving to him, calling out, “Hasta luego, sunshine!”)

(“DON’T CALL ME THAT EITHER,” he growls as loud as his smoke-filled lungs can manage, and he nearly hurls his bag of treats at her from the door of the train as she laughs brightly.)

76 boards his train, sliding the duffel bag into the overhead shelving. He seats himself by the window, waving to Alejandra one last time as the warning lights flash in the compartment.

In the eastbound train, Reaper flashes his first class ticket to the conductor, who lets him pass through. He pulls the guitar off his back, slotting it overhead, and then sinks into the extra cushy seat, reclining it as far back as he’ll go. He settles in by the window, watching Sombra turn even as she wedges another buñuelo into her mouth and chuckles wryly to himself.

Reaper contemplates the bag of treats on his lap, before opening it up and pulling out a mostly-warm torrija. With no one around him, he rips off a piece, and shifts his mask, throwing the bite into his mouth.
It tastes at once familiar, sugar and cinnamon and the barest hint of salt, milk, and honey.

It tastes like home.

As the train starts to move, Reaper gives one last long look at the train platform, but he’s not really seeing that -

He’s seeing blue surrounded by red glass and red blood.

He tears off another piece of the torrijas, and thinks of stained glass.

In the southbound train, 76 leans into the seat as they begin to move. He watches the station slowly pull away from them, pulling him from the lights and the water. After a moment, he tugs out his datapad, and digs through his side pouch, fingers brushing against the small pocketknife, the little roughened piece of wood, the knobbed black cotton, until he finds the small pack. He brings that out, unraveling the small earbuds from their carrier, slotting them into the datapad.

He taps through the music until he finds “Sonhos Ómnicos” and then settles back to think of forgotten priorities, cracked promises, and unyielding paradigms.

As their trains speed away

They settle into their thoughts

Filled with blue darkness and bone bitterness and long, brightly-colored shadows

And weighed down by old habits

(And old loves)

They cannot break.

Chapter End Notes

In all my dreams, dear, you seem to leave me
When I awake my poor heart pains
So when you come back and make me happy
I'll forgive you, dear, I'll take all the blame

(I know beyond a doubt
My heart will lead me there soon
And we'll meet, I know we'll meet beyond the shore
We'll meet just as before)

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

(Happy we'll be beyond the sea
And never again I'll go sailing
No more sailing)

---

If it isn't obvious, this was meant to be the original ending of "Old Habits"

But then I remembered that we were missing some important parts.

So

Next week: we go back to the beginning, where Gabriel and Jack are given the opportunities of their lifetimes - the chance to be "enhanced" soldiers.

Together.

---

Edit: realized I should probably add -

I'm in the middle of writing the sequel right now, haha.
Beyond The Sea

Chapter Summary

Here's the obligatory "The OG Strike Team relaxes and has a good (?) time after a horrific battle" scene.

In the past, Gabriel gets offered an opportunity that is not merely once-in-a-lifetime, but truly unique in the entirety of history.

He says yes.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay. A friend had a major medical emergency last Thursday afternoon, and I and my other friends have been kinda reeling from it since. The friend is okay, but life might get more complicated for us in the next few weeks.

Moving on.

HOLY HELL, Y'ALL, the comments on the last chapter made me DIE with laughter. I'm glad you guys really enjoyed Memer Gabriel and Ridiculous Jack because that was honestly some of the funnest, funniest stuff to write.

This week, we're continuing the feel-good train with some songs!

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Song is "Vivir Mi Vida" by Marc Anthony ([Youtube link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb2mJc0Q6Mw))

(Look out for some surprises!)

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Voy a reír, voy a bailar**

**vivir mi vida, la, la, la, la**

**Voy a reír, voy a gozar**

**vivir mi vida, la, la, la, la**

[I'm going to laugh, I'm going to dance]
"You really didn’t have to bring this," Gabriel mutters to Gabrielle, shifting the guitar in his hands. The six main Overwatch Strike members are sitting on the eastern side of the central courtyard of the mission, Gabriel seated on one of the stone benches, Jack to his left, Torbjörn to his right. The other three have pulled over some camp chairs and a small crate, where they’ve piled up their “shared collection” of alcohol and cards.

Behind Gabriel, over the eastern sea, the moon slowly rises in the sky, casting whitegold light across the blue darkness, mingling with the warm tarnished glow from the lamps and candles set about the courtyard. Everything exists in shades of bright and dark colors, half radiant and half dim, as twilight yields to the draw of the night. There’s the sound of the rumbling roll of the tide beyond them, waves crashing onto the shore below the cliff the mission sits on, as blue upon blue upon blue crests inward from the horizon where eternity meets the sea.

Around the courtyard, more soldiers and rurales fighters mill about, singing, chanting, laughing, playing games, drinking, talking. There is even a group of children still awake, running around the courtyard, throwing neon glo-paint at each other as they shriek and flee in a strange game of tag, a group of nuns and priests watching them with critical eyes.

It had been a long day in and of itself - after spending some much needed, uh, “quality time” together, Gabriel and Jack had drifted down to the beach, where they had found the other three throwing each other into the water. The two American supersoldiers had quickly joined in, and there had proceeded to be several rounds of chicken with different configurations of people on other people’s shoulders. At some point Torbjörn had built a sandcastle that the others struggled to dig a proper moat for, steadily losing ground to the onslaught of the ceaseless attack of the waves. They had been in the middle of trying to bury Reinhardt in the sand when a U.N. aide had finally found them, saying that Adawe and Portero were looking for them.

After some hasty showers and another quick trip to their room to get changed, the Strike team had begrudgingly made their way to the local government building, where Portero had set up his headquarters. They had started to discuss possible plans of attack against Quetzalcoatl’s Omnium, going over supplies, routes, tactics, limitations, the full gamut. The meeting had lasted hours, so they were well and truly hungry by the time it was over. After grabbing some much needed if late lunch -

They had helped out around the city.

Reinhardt and Torbjörn had gone to assist with some of the structural repairs, with the Crusader hauling the bare bones metals and sheets for temporary buildings as the engineer snapped them into place and constructed more makeshift rooms out of raw materials. Ana had ended up with a bunch of the U.N. aides, taking over Gabrielle’s role as she directed them to move supplies to different
places or assist different groups.

Gabriel had followed Jack to the medical tents - he wasn’t as proficient in first aid as Jack, but he figured he could hold things steady or carry supplies around.

He hadn’t been prepared.

At five years into the Crisis, Gabriel knew he was - by all definitions - “a battle-hardened veteran,” as was every member of the Strike team. He had seen human troops and Omnic soldiers alike die in the hundreds, if not thousands at a time. He had taken more than his fair share of bullets to his body - his increasing amount of scars, stitched together by Jack’s increasingly steady hands, were a testament to that. He had arguably fought in more battles than anyone save his own team members.

He hadn’t been prepared to enter those tents.

Jack had been his calm in the storm of cries and soft whimpers, the whispers of agony and the shouts of hurt. Jack had taken his hand and the two of them had gone to the first cot, where Jack had introduced them to the nurse and then -

Jack had sat them beside the patient.

And Jack had just talked.

It was like Jack had never noticed the man’s - Victor, they learned his name - missing leg, or the fact that Victor was only semi-coherent, borderline drugged out of his mind on the painkillers. And Jack, by whatever witchcraft he worked, had pulled Gabriel into the conversation too, until the three of them were talking about fishing (?) out on the Gulf Coast.

And then they had moved on to the next patient, bidding Victor farewell.

And somehow

Somehow

Gabriel had found himself administering biotic fluid or shots, applying bandages, holding people still as stitches were sewn, right alongside Jack, who somehow - somehow - drew smiles as he drew blood, caused chuckles or laughter as he poked needles into veins, pulled words from people even as he pulled stitches through wounds.

And somehow

Somehow

Gabriel found himself talking along, smiling back, cracking jokes or muttering “Dios dame paciencia” over Jack’s puns, laughing along with patients over Jack’s stories about getting lost in his family’s own corn maze or Gabriel’s first snowball fight at West Point. By the time dinner rolled around, the two of them had visited with nearly seventy different patients in three different tents. The Strike Team had regrouped with the other soldiers and rurales fighters, eating more of the stew handed out, chatting with people about Dorado, or the recovery, or even things as simple and as carefree as what they would do once dinner was done.

And that was when Gabrielle had mentioned she had brought them all “comforts.”

Alcohol and cards, coffee packs and a guitar.
“I thought you could use a bit of music in your lives,” Gabrielle says slyly, taking a sip from her glass. Jack leans against him as Gabriel mumbles dryly, “I could use another bottle of tequila, to be honest -”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Gabriel,” Ana chides him, and Reinhardt nods vigorously, “Play us a song, Gabriel!”

“Hmm,” Gabriel hums to himself, strumming over a few chords as he lets the food and alcohol warm his veins and Jack’s low, rumbling chuckle against his left shoulder warms his soul. Jack smirks lightly as he recognizes the tune starting up, feels the small shifts of Gabriel’s shoulder as his left fingers hold down the strings on the neck.

Jack starts giggling slightly when he hears Torbjörn groan and -

“Is this ‘Hotel California?’” Ana scowls, pausing from her drink. Torbjörn’s groaning gets louder as even Reinhardt makes a sour face. Gabriel’s mischievous chuckle soothes Jack’s soul and ripples through him like a breath of sunshine.

“We have to start with a classic,” Gabriel explains, and Jack can feel the smirk in his words, as Jack begins to sing:

“On a dark desert highway - cool wind in my hair - warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air -”

Gabriel feels a small frisson shiver crawl across his head as Jack’s slow, summer storm voice sings sweet and low and perfect, music with a threat of thunder and a touch of heat and honey ease. But the others don’t vibe with it quite the same way.

“C’mon, Gabriel, pick a song we can actually drink to,” Ana teases him, with Reinhardt adding in, “Or DANCE to -”

“Or anything other than The Eagles,” Torbjörn mutters on the right causing Gabrielle to laugh as Gabriel grumbles, “What you all got against the national anthem of California?”

“It’s not as great a song when it’s the thousandth time you’ve heard it,” Ana cracks wryly and Torbjörn growls lowly, “Or it’s just not that great a song -”

“Okay, okay, pendejos,” Gabriel snaps at them as his fingers shift the tune to a familiar up-down-up-down jangle -

“Y’all want a song to dance to, huh?” Gabriel smirks darkly as Jack suddenly howls with laughter, sob-singing, “Hello, Darkness my old friend - I’ve come to talk with you again -”

“Oh god,” Ana chokes out as Torbjörn just straight up chokes on his drink. Reinhardt also guffaws, the sheer volume of his laughter drawing attention from everyone in the courtyard.

“- Because a vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping -”

“What did we do to deserve ‘The Sound of Silence?’” Torbjörn demands, half-coughing, half-choking as Jack half-sings, half-laughs against him, and in this moment, surrounded by all that he loves, Gabriel is so warm so unconditional
so everlasting
so complete.
This moment perfects him -
---------

A veces llega la lluvia
para limpiar las heridas.
A veces sólo una gota
puede vencer la sequía

[Sometimes rain comes
to clean wounds.
Sometimes just a drop
can overcome the drought]

Y para qué llorar, ¿Pa' qué?
Si duele una pena, se olvida
Y para qué sufrir, ¿Pa' qué?
Si así es la vida, hay que vivirla

[And cry for what, for what?
If a pain hurts, forget it.
And suffer for what, for what?
If that's life, then it must be lived.]

---------

Segador Flashback: Where The Heart Is

January 3, 2046: 10:21 a.m. - makeshift SEP headquarters in Bakersfield, California
Gabriel seats himself in the chilled, metal foldable chair, plopping himself unceremoniously at the rickety steel-wrought table.

He waits for Marc to do the same on the other end.

They’ve been through this song and dance many, many times over the last two years, down to the exact day when they first met. They started in a West Point meeting room, transitioned to dull, boring concrete rooms in the SEP facility in Boise National Forest, and then into Army tents and makeshift shelters on the outskirts of Bakersfield.

And now -

Ever since they reclaimed the city -

Ever since they defeated the Central Core and all its forces -

Ever since “Soldier: 127” led his fellow supersoldiers to outsmart the super intelligence of supercomputers -

Ever since Gabriel broke the tide of the battle -

Ever since then

They’ve done this “I’m a covert ops agent trying to convince you, the tactician supersoldier, to do what the government wants” song and dance in the semi-destroyed, semi-“Army-repaired” remains of an office building -

Printers and scanners and cubicles still semi-standing in some rooms -

Pushed around to create makeshift barracks for the Army forces and CIA agents.

Few words could describe the emotions that had overwhelmed Gabriel - and continued to threaten to drown him - when SEP had brought the supersoldiers to California.

He thinks he had temporarily stopped breathing when he had seen the Transverse Ranges to the southern edge of the Central Valley, hard ridges cut sharp against the haze of the blue-grey skies. There had been ships and drones in the horizon, the wail of sirens, the hoarse calls of commanders shouting, but in that moment -

He had felt -

“You holding up okay?” Jack had asked him, lightly nudging a fist against Gabriel’s left shoulder, knocking a small sliver of sense back into him. Gabriel had flicked his gaze to his boyfriend, who had given him that charming smirk, and returned the look with a faint smile of his own.

“The Transverse Ranges,” he had said to the Indiana-native, gesturing to the mountains, sky upon chaparral upon earth. Gabriel had tried to fight the rush of bittersweet joyfury that attacked the concrete skin of his mind, adding with a soft crack to his voice, “On the south side is San Fernando and Los Angeles.”

Jack had not missed the break in his words, however subtle it had been.

“Oh hey,” Jack had replied casually, as if they had not just landed in the middle of an active Army base camp on the south end of a besieged city. The blonde had leaned against him, resting his elbow on Gabriel’s shoulder, saying with a smirk to his voice, “I’ve been there. It was alright.”
“Your attitude is just alright,” Gabriel had retorted, wedging an elbow into Jack’s ribs, causing him to squirm and -

Marc still hasn’t sat down across from him.

Instead, the CIA agent just sighs heavily.

“The program is reaching termination,” Marc explains to him, and Gabriel sits back in the chair, folding his arms with a huff, “Fucking finally. Was beginning to think you were just gonna keep us here indefinitely. Good to know I can finally go home completely fucked raw -”

“I doubt you’re going home, Soldier: 127,” Marc gives him a wry but exhausted smile and Gabriel realizes that maybe this program had fucked up more than just the test subjects. The CIA agent steps back, heading to the door, saying over his shoulder, “You have a visitor.”

Well.

Looks like there was still a first for everything.

“The fuck? We were allowed visitors?” Gabriel’s tired brain spits out of his mouth before his tact fully processes his stupidity. The agent chuckles at him as he opens the door, before addressing the person outside, “He’s all yours, ma’am.”

Gabriel scowls as the dark-skinned, short-haired, respectably-dressed woman enters the room. Despite the formality of her outfit, he notes the bright, zigzagging woven pattern - African, maybe West African - and the calm, cool confidence with which she carries her short stature, the way her posture is upright but not stiff - authoritative but not overbearing. When she seats herself, he is impressed with the steely, unwavering gaze of her dark eyes and he inclines his head with as much reverence as his exhausted ass can manage:

“If it isn’t the Security Council Under-Secretary-General herself.”

“Greetings to you, Mr. Reyes,” she says, not unkindly but rather coolly, and he suffers a smirk at her, retorting, “You can call me Gabriel if I can call you Gabrielle. People with good names ought to use them.”

“Why, you are a cheeky one,” Adawe leverages at him, but Gabriel thinks he sees a spark of mirth in those dark eyes, and his smirk deepens, “Pretty sure that’s not the description those bastards used for me. Not the description I’d use either, to be honest with you.”

“And what description would you use for yourself, Gabriel?” Adawe smiles testily at him and oh man, Gabriel likes her already.

He likes it when superiors play along.

“Well, ‘raging fucking asshole’ is a good place to start. Supposedly I shouldn’t use that around polite company, but I’ve been stuck in bumfuck Idaho so long I ain’t used to that any more.” Gabriel practically bares fangs at her but she just raises an eyebrow, chuckling, “You truly leave nothing to the imagination, hmm?”

“Funny, ‘unimaginative, raging fucking asshole’ is the description Jack would probably use,” Gabriel says, still grinning viciously at her, “But he’s in the minority. I think I’m pretty damn clever, personally.”

“Hmph, your military thinks you’re rather clever as well,” she states as casually as she can manage.
but even exhausted, Gabriel already knows where this is going.

“Well, I’m just so fucking pleased to hear that - think they’ll give me a good letter of recommendation to my first job?” he snorts and Adawe

Adawe just smirks at him.

...well, shit.

“They already have,” she chuckles, but the smug look never leaves her face, “In fact, they recommended you with the highest possible praise I’ve seen.”

“Why couldn’t they have said anything nice about me to my face, huh?” Gabriel asks, and it’s only partially a joke, “Would’ve been nice to hear I was doing something right from one of those assholes.”

“Currently, the majority of them are...rather preoccupied,” Adawe murmurs, and her face grows a bit more somber with the words. Gabriel frowns at her, saying, “Cut the crap - what are you here for?”

Adawe sighs, her dark eyes drawing down to the table as she folds her hands on it, intertwining her fingers, murmuring, “They did tell me you would be blunt. I should have anticipated this.”

“I am not a patient man,” Gabriel huffs, “Did they tell you about that too?”

“I have heard that as well,” she laughs lightly, but the lighthearted sound does not reach her eyes. She again levels them at Gabriel, face looking more serious than ever, and states:

“The United Nations Security Council and General Assembly have secured the necessary votes and funding to commission a supra-national militia force tasked with defeating the Omniums. We are beginning our search for the most qualified people to recruit into it.”

...Well, shit.

“...I’d like to think there’s not much that can surprise me,” Gabriel says dryly, “But, fuck me, that’s surprising. The United States and Russia gave you guys that much power, huh?”

“This is a serious matter, Mr. Reyes -”

“No fucking shit it’s a serious matter if the U.S., Russia, and China agreed to let y’all make an organization that superseeds them, what the fuck. This is unprecedented,” Gabriel mutters, beginning to ramble slightly, and Adawe’s bleak expression relaxes a little. She unfolds her hands, saying more calmly, “I see you are at least aware of the level of severity of this issue.”

“How in the hell did you get them to agree?” Gabriel asks, genuinely curious at the fucking international political power play this must’ve taken and Adawe smiles at him with a slight chill, “...They didn’t.”

“...Well, mierda, that’s even more surprising - the reps stepped out of line, huh?” Gabriel whistles.

“The individual personal members of the United Nations have recognized that this is the worst, most horrific crisis humankind has ever faced and probably ever will,” Adawe replies sternly, with an unusual amount of verve in her tone, “Many of them have gone against their nations’ wills to vote this power into the United Nations.”

“...It’s that bad, huh?” Gabriel mutters solemnly, and Adawe -
She breaks her stoicism, rubbing a hand to a tired eye and Gabriel watches as weariness transforms her from a straight-backed, firm authority figure to an exhausted, bone-aching probable mother and wife, sitting patiently across from a supersoldier who’s giving her a hell of a time just to do her job.

...Well, shit.

“We’ve heard stories but...they don’t let us have much news in here,” Gabriel replies, his tone softening a bit, and Adawe huffs, “You have no idea, Mr. Reyes. National and even multinational level military organizations are failing the world over. Other supersoldiers and enhanced martial humans are being killed in action no matter what tactics their nations or groups try. Just last July, an entire battalion of German supersoldier Crusaders were brutally destroyed outside of Stuttgart. It took years for the European Defensive to develop that program: these were some of the greatest soldiers in the world, using some of the best equipment technology can make - gone in a matter of minutes. They held the line at Eichenwalde just long enough for the European Defensive to push back the Bastion units and Titans, but it cost hundreds of thousands of lives, including half of the still-living Crusaders.”

Gabriel sits in silence.

It’s all that he can do.

“The United Nations is at its wits’ end - Russia continues to refuse to cooperate, even though a combined Russian-Chinese military force would probably be enough to push back against the Siberian Omnium. The United States and Canada have their hands full with battling the Detroit and Seattle Omniums - not to mention the Bakersfield and Houston Central Cores - and they can spare no help to the European or Latin Defensive forces. Without assistance from Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, the Latin Defensive forces are falling apart - La Medianoche continues to spread in Central America. Perhaps we could stop it if Brazil stepped in but they insist on an isolationist policy to combat the Brasilia Omnium. My home country of Nigeria has completely fallen apart, and any attempts by the rest of the West African coalition to fend off the Ibadan Omnium are futile. And that doesn’t even cover the losses in the Middle East, India, Australia…”

“And you think I can help do what hundreds of thousands others cannot?” Gabriel asks darkly and Adawe puts her weary but focused gaze back on his, saying coolly:

“We are out of options and rapidly running out of time.”

Gabriel stares at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers for a way out, any way out, for the possibility of reprieve and a chance to escape.

He finds none.

There is no escaping this - not this moment, not this decision,

Not this reckoning.

He thinks of his mother and sisters, stuck in L.A, stuck in the probable destruction and ruins of the world.

He thinks of his uncle, sitting in Washington, probably terrified as the world falls apart in his hands.

He thinks of his friends from West Point - have they gone off to fight, how many of them are still alive, still okay.

He thinks of his fellow supersoldiers - how weary they look, even them, “enhanced” as they are,
“trained” as they are, breaking down in tents and barracks and facilities each night.

He thinks of Jamie and Louisa - their eyes hollowed with a thousand yards, blood on their hands and ash soaked into the sweat on their faces, limps etched into their gaits.

He thinks of Adrien and Geni - Adrien’s hand rubbing slow soothing circles on Geni’s back as her sobs fall into quiet, broken tremors, shivering and shattering her down to her core.

He thinks of Carlos and Wes.

Grief squeezes his heart.

He thinks of Carlos and Wes, their eyes shut, their faces paler than usual, drained of their lives, their bodies being zipped up into bags.

Pain grips his heart.

He thinks.

He thinks of Jack.

He thinks of Jack - his drawn face, long and dark and full of shadows after the Bakersfield battle, his solid but shaking arms as he held Gabriel’s shuddering, grieving body, his calloused, rough, but warm fingers gently tracing Gabriel’s scalp as Gabriel buried his face into Jack’s shoulder -

“I failed them, I failed, I fucked up, I failed them -”

“You didn’t, Gabriel. They followed you because they knew you would succeed.”

He thinks of Jack.

He thinks of Jack - curled against him in the blue nightfall darkness, in the shuddering quiet of the tents, as order broke down among the supersoldiers and they fell in with each other for comfort and grief, of kisses - strong and soft, gentle and grieving - pressed to his deep, rich skin as that summer storm voice sang sweetly to him, low and loving against his ear, as the soothing sound of his voice washed Gabriel’s hurt away.

He thinks of Jack.

He thinks of Jack - of that brilliant smile and his easy laughter, of moans of his name “Gabriel” in the darkness and whispers of enamored Spanish in stolen moments, of frustrating jokes and his terrible humor, of the quiet counting when the drugs get overwhelming, of calm, reassuring hands on his back when the tremors come on too strong.

He thinks of Jack - of sunshine and shimmering water, of days at the beach in the summer and snowball fights in West Point, of finding lunch at the smallest restaurants and choking down rations in the cold cells, of clear, blue eyes filled with pride and admiration and the strength of his soul, of a clear, deep voice as strong as thunder and as gentle as rain.

He thinks of Jack.

He thinks.

He decides.

“...I don’t know what I can do to help you,” Gabriel tells her softly, but full of the weight of his
decision, “But I will do it anyways.”

Adawe looks at him...sadly?

“Should you perhaps not consider it further?” she says gently, patiently - caring, in her own way, “This will be the most dangerous task in the world - there is no exaggeration here. There is nothing more deadly, nothing more demanding than what this task force will set out to do.”

“At this point I hate the U.S. Military - I only joined this program because someone important to me asked me to, and he came here with me,” Gabriel answers bluntly, “And I’m only going to join your shit if you bring him along, but the caveat is that...well, there’s not really much of a choice, is there? If everything else is failing, the only option is to do whatever hasn’t been tried before.”

Adawe continues to look at him sadly, and Gabriel sighs, “Look, I generally hate people. I always have, I probably always will. And this current war isn’t really doing much to persuade me to change my stance on that - I mean, nations can’t even work together to properly bomb some robot factories in, what, nine or ten months? That’s not just people being stupid, that’s a major flaw of general humanity. That’s some next-level uncoordinated bullshit right there. So if you think you’re locking in some sort of noble war hero here, well...if it wasn’t immediately apparent, that’s wrong as all hell.”

Adawe scowls a little over his words, but Gabriel grins with a mischievous boldness, “But I got a select few I’m lookin’ out for, and frankly, helping you is gonna help them way more than me like, Survivor-ing it out in the Rockies or some shit - I’m not an idiot. Working with an organized, well-funded military group is gonna preserve my chances of survival and the survival of those I care about in the long run way better than me trying to go it alone.”

And then -

He thinks of Jack.

Gabriel grins:

“Also Jack’s gonna say yes without even fucking thinking about it, so pretty much this shit’s been decided for me from the moment you even put me on your candidate list.”

Adawe sighs heavily, shutting her eyes wearily and Gabriel shrugs, saying bluntly, “You asked.”

“I did, I just...I just wish that it had not come to this,” Adawe murmurs regretfully, but manages to straighten herself back up, saying firmly, “May I be the first to congratulate you on joining the United Nations Special Operations Unconventional Tactics Supra-Military Task Force, Gabriel Reyes. I will pray only for your success.”

“...The hell kinda name is that?” Gabriel asks, “You couldn’t do something snappier like ‘Justice League’ or ‘The Avengers’ or ‘Teen Titans’ or something?”

“Don’t ask,” she says dryly, “It took days just to vote on the task force. You do not want to know some of the other names that were suggested. If you think of something, uh, ‘snappier,’ feel free to use it.”

“...Good to know,” Gabriel mutters, before asking, “So who else have you recruited? Do you have paperwork? I can listen to information and absorb none of it - I gotta read it -”

“We have not recruited anyone else,” Adawe says bluntly and Gabriel shuts right the fuck up as she states with a slight smile, “Congratulations, Gabriel, you were our first choice.”
He’s usually pretty quick-witted but this gets him tongue-tied.

“I - ¿qué?? No fucking way - mira, I know I’ve been giving you a hard time, Gabrielle, but don’t do this to me. I have a fragile ego, don’t mess with me like this,” Gabriel stammers, only half-joking, and Adawe just rolls her eyes, stating, “Look at you, being a cheeky bastard even when you’re flustered.”

“I just...why?”

It’s fucking terrifying, the realization that a set of highly qualified if bureaucratic people think there’s literally no one better than him for this.

It scares the shit outta him.

“You have succeeded in all of the simulations the American supersoldier program has put you through. That is a 100% success rate. None of our other candidates have achieved that.”

“...I find it sketchy as fuck that you guys think a twenty-three year old with no real military experience outside of one battlefront is your best bet against humanity’s greatest enemy,” Gabriel states bluntly and Adawe looks him directly in the eye and replies, “Real military experience is failing on every battlefront currently being waged.”

Gabriel slumps forward, resting his head in his hands, mumbling, “Qué chingados está pasando - just nuke them.”

“The Russians already have - it does not work.”

“...Jesus fucking Christ.”

“The Omnium Core Programs and God Programs are capable of generating force fields against all manner of aerial strikes - these force fields often are the size of cities and protect the Core and God Programs from battlefield-level tactics. Sieges have proved futile as Omnics do not require food, water, or other resources.”

“Destroy their power sources?” Gabriel asks weakly, fully knowing the response she has.

“They are self-sufficient and run on fusion cores - assuming they do not destroy humankind, the average Omnium will not only survive, but continue producing soldiers for nearly two-thousand years.”

“Sounds like it’s time to give up,” Gabriel mutters and he expects a sharp rebuke or a moralizing speech about finding resolve and strength in the human spirit or some such shit. But she -

“...You did not give up against the Bakersfield Central Core.”

He fucking stops breathing.

“...That wasn’t - I mean -” his normally solid voice breaks out of his throat in hollow, weak sounds, and with an almost cold, almost cruel chuckle, Adawe states:

“Gabriel Reyes, you are the only person in the world to have defeated an Omnium.”

He lifts his face from his hands and stares into those deep, hardened eyes with a growing sense of helplessness and loss.

“Whole armies have been felled, the German Crusaders have been crushed, the population of Korea
has been cut in half, over 75% of Mexico is without power,” Adawe says darkly. “The United States has ordered the evacuation of all towns with populations under five-thousand people, and other countries are following suit. I fear we are only herding people to their deaths, but the majority of the world no longer has the infrastructure to support sending supplies or resources to isolated areas.”

Gabriel stares at her grimly.

The light has left his soul.

“The U.S. Military has analyzed your success in Bakersfield. Covert tactics have been tried the world over but the majority have not succeeded - Core and God Programs know what is occurring within one-hundred meters of their locations -” she starts, but Gabriel interrupts her.

“...They still have to see you to know where you are,” Gabriel says lamely, and Adawe huffs, “They are capable of having hundreds of thousands of eyes at once.”

“All eyes have blind spots. They are only connected to their other robots - they only have them as eyes,” Gabriel mutters, “And in the end they only have one consciousness.”

Adawe scowls slightly, assessing his words before half-asking, half-commanding, “...Explain.”

“They can only focus on so much at a time,” he answers with a shrug, “Even a supercomputer has limits. It’s just a machine.”

“You had people dress up as Omnics,” Adawe states with utter disbelief, “And that was somehow ‘hitting the limits’ of an Omnic Core Program?”

“No, that was simply getting people close enough to find the blind spots and create a diversion,” Gabriel replies bluntly.

“Covert military organizations the world over have failed time and again and you expect me to believe that squads of supersoldiers dressed in Bastion armor pieces were enough to trick a Core Program into letting them get close enough to hurt it?” Adawe practically demands of him.

“No,” Gabriel says fiercely, “Squads of supersoldiers dressed in Bastion armor snuck in close enough to damage the proton security on a fusion core, causing the Core Program to panic, causing it to withdraw troops from its defensive line, allowing a weakness in the line that literally hitting it hard enough with rockets and missiles and plasma pulses was enough to cause it to break. You don’t destroy the dam by taking bricks off the fucking top - you poke a hole at the base and let gravity do the rest.”

Adawe grows silent as Gabriel’s intensity grows stronger, “Of course military procedures and even covert tactics are failing - you can’t fucking fight a war of attrition with robots. Everything in a textbook, everything the world’s militaries have ‘perfected’ over the centuries - they fucking know all of this. They expect it. You run humans like machines, so no fucking wonder the superior machines themselves come out on top.”

“And what do you fight them with? Costumes?” Adawe asks, with both frustration and genuine curiosity in her voice.

“Motherfucking human ingenuity and creativity and lots of fuckery.”

Adawe jerks back at bit in surprise before muttering lowly, “I did not take you to be such an idealist, Gabriel.”
“It’s not idealism, Gabrielle, it’s learning history. Surprise attacks work only when you lure your enemies into a sense of security and break it with surrealism. The fall of Rome was successful due to the slave revolts breaking the city from within. I got my own issues with the man, but Cortés defeated the Mexica by using absurd political and strategic tricks that made allies out of enemies. Hannibal’s successes at Trebia and Trasimene were effectively ‘massive tricks’ and large-scale sleight of hand that took advantage of the landscapes. Even at Cannae he won by turning mind games into real tactics. And I know it’s fucking stereotypically American of me, but Washington’s surprise assault at Trenton was pretty genius for the miserable American army. The Battle of Mokra was successful because - inadvertently - the Polish cavalry managed to disorient the fuck out of the German tank forces. There’s the Empty Fort Strategy, or even the grandfather of them all - the Trojan Horse.”

“You are referring to mythology,” Adawe says incredulously and Gabriel fires back:

“And tell me, which strategy worked - the one where you unloaded a fuckton of aerial missiles on a force field over Bakersfield, or the one where some soldiers pretended to be robots for ten minutes?”

Adawe falls silent again and Gabriel sneers, “Have you even tried to understand your enemies?”

Once again, Adawe half-asks, half-commands, “...Explain.”

“You have all these fucking numbers and stats about the Omnics, but have you thought about how they think? The things they react to? Their own expectations?” Gabriel questions right back to her, “Of course they’re gonna expect bombs and shit - that’s what they’re prepared for, that’s what military history has been for the last century, ever since the U.S. dropped a bomb on Hiroshima.

“What y’all don’t realize is that these things got the intelligence of supercomputers, all the military might of the U.S. nuclear weapons stock, and the mental and emotional experience of toddlers.”

“What?” Adawe snaps in disbelief, and Gabriel rolls his head sarcastically, muttering, “These assholes woke up like a year ago. They can program themselves to be above collective human intelligence, but they can’t program themselves to be more experienced or mature. The simplest surprise tactics combined with basic understanding and communication can work on them because they wrote them off as human fairy tales before this war even began - fucking ironic considering they call themselves Gods. They believe themselves to be ‘omniscient’ due to the sheer size of their supercomputers, but that means nothing when they fall for the same ‘tricks’ that humans have been warring on each other for thousands of years.

“They employ strategies like ants, not like humans - their collective centers around their queen, or the God or Core Programs, and everything the others do is in service of the God or Core and the collective. And this only works when the lesser bots have the mental maturity and emotional experience of infants but this also means they can be easily tricked. Individual lesser bots only have standard eyesight and perceive things only in a linear fashion - a Bastion only looks one direction, and why would it look in other directions if it thinks three of those four directions are other friendly Bastions?”

Adawe assesses him calmly and Gabriel stares right back, snapping, “Trying to outmaneuver them isn’t gonna work. You gotta out-play them.”

“Do you think your tactic will work again?”

“That depends on if it was only the U.S. Military that analyzed the attack, unless you think the Cores don’t talk to each other,” Gabriel says dryly, because they both already know that’s not true. But Adawe -
She just grins mischievously at him, asking:

“Well, Strike Commander, do you have more tactical tricks up your sleeve?”

Gabriel almost openly gawks at her, until he smirks back - vividly, viciously, victoriously - humming, “I have a few ideas. Depends on the toys you want to give me to play with.”

“The world is your oyster,” Adawe informs him, “I do not have the information here with me, but you will have access to the candidate list the United Nations has compiled at our Headquarters in New York. We’ll let you select your team, build an army, give you any resources you want or need,” Adawe says coolly and Gabriel immediately holds up a hand, saying, “First - fusion weapons.”

“...What about them?” she asks him skeptically and he gives her a blank, dead stare, “C’mon, Gabrielle. I want them.”

“...If you are referring to the weapons you have used here,” Adawe says cautiously, “They are not United Nations property -”

“Oh, c’mon, Gabrielle,” Gabriel titters at her with a dark chuckle, “You expect me to believe that you can put me in charge of a supra-national task force and I DON’T have the ability to seize the good goods for my team?”

“...Do you have something in mind?” Adawe asks cautiously, but there’s a light, playful smile on her lips and in her eyes, and he grins, “We take the Heavy Pulse Rifle and Plasma-Slag Shotguns.”

“...The CIA will not like you stealing their toys,” Adawe cautions him, but Gabriel just shrugs nonchalantly, smirking as he states, “It’s not like they can use them - the recoil on all their experimental fusion weaponry is too much for the average human. We’re not stupid - we all know that’s why they made us supersoldiers in the first place.”

“...I will see what I can swing for you,” Adawe laughs lightly, but Gabriel can see that spark of energy in her dark eyes, a flicker of the power that he knows drove her to get this task force created in the first place - to defy the crumbling remains of old world powers, even as they stubbornly refused to acknowledge that they were dying, to build a chance for the future.

“That’s all I’m asking for, Gabrielle, glad we could see eye-to-eye on this,” Gabriel continues to smirk, before adding:

“Second: Jack comes with me.”

Adawe stares at him for a long beat before her face twists with confusion, “You keep mentioning him but... Who is Jack?”

“Oh shit, uh, Soldier: 76 - Jack Morrison. I guess technically he’s John, but don’t call him that, he hates it - actually, no wait, do it, it’ll be fucking funny -” Gabriel starts to ramble, stumbling his own thoughts as they churn forward, to the future they’re beginning to build. Adawe raises an eyebrow at him, before sighing, “You have a tragic sense of humor, Gabriel.”

“Oye, listen - my two greatest pleasures in life are fucking Jack and fucking with Jack, so you’re just gonna have to humor me on this,” Gabriel snaps with a light-burning chuckle, “Also you’ll probably be putting up with this for the foreseeable future.”

“...I will keep that in mind,” Adawe says dryly, before adding thoughtfully, “...John Morrison. He was on our list - he was your...Second-in-Command in your strategy, correct?”
“Oh, well, that settles that,” Gabriel mutters unhelpfully, explaining, “Yeah, Jack was behind me every step of the way, but...But more than that, Jack helped me convince the company command to even give this strategy a shot. I...”

Gabriel pauses, searching his emotions for the words, before settling on:

“I would not have been able to succeed without him.”

Adawe watches him closely as Gabriel smiles faintly, smiles to himself, smiles to the piece of Jack stitched into his heart, murmuring as gently and as warmly as sunshine on water:

“Jack is...Jack is a force to be reckoned with. Jack has the ability to lead people, to make them believe in the possibilities of change. Jack kept the others’ morale high when things got rough in the Omnium. We succeeded because he can rally people around him like no other.

“We succeeded because we were a team.”

“...I see,” Adawe says slowly, contemplatively, before adding, “I was...a bit shocked to hear that you two are in a relationship. You can understand why it would concern me that you would want him to join.”

“...What, why?” Gabriel asks, snapping back to the moment, focusing his gaze back on her again. Adawe looks at him sternly, saying sharply but with pointed control, “Gabriel, surely you must see how...unethical it looks to accept someone onto the Strike Team purely because the commander is romantically involved with him.”

...Oh.

“However, since he is on our candidate list anyways, and you consider him to be integral to enacting your strategies,” Adawe sighs, “I don’t think there will be much of a problem to getting him in the team. Still, it would be...wise to keep your relationship known to a limited amount of people.”

“...Duly noted,” Gabriel says dryly, slowly beginning to understand that maybe, just maybe, some aspects of SEP permitted more freedoms than a supra-national task force would. He adds lowly, “...Thank you. For the advice.”

“...I care not what happens behind closed doors, Gabriel, and we all must keep our loved ones close in a time of war,” Adawe replies with a strict kindness in her voice and an even-keeled expression, “But as of this moment, you will be entering the international stage. What you and your future team will set out to do will be no laughing matter. The United Nations is making one last push to prevent what may be the end of humanity as we know it.”

Gabriel feels an emotion he cannot name sink into the depth of his soul.

“I personally have no qualms about letting you bring your partner along, especially if he is as important and as capable as you say,” the Under-Secretary-General continues, and Gabriel feels a strange pressure settle onto his shoulders with the weight of her words. Despite her shorter stature, Adawe stares him down with all the force of the world in her eyes, saying levelly, “And you may be blunt about your motivations that led you to join us, but the moment you leave this room, you will not be Gabriel Reyes. You will not be Soldier: 127. You will not be a simple experimental tactician. You will be a global leader. You will be an international general -

“You will be the highest-ranking military officer in the world.”

Gabriel is pretty sure he has stopped breathing.
Something in his mind cracks slightly under the weight of the world.

Adawe focuses her gaze on his, her words seem a world away:

“We’re counting on you to watch over us, Strike-Commander Reyes.”

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Voy a reír, voy a bailar
vivir mi vida, la, la, la, la
Voy a reír, voy a gozar
vivir mi vida, la, la, la, la

[I’m going to laugh, I’m going to dance
To live my life, la la la la
I’m going to laugh, I’m going to enjoy
To live my life, la la la la]

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“Are you actually going to serenade us with ‘Ze Sound of Silence?’” Reinhardt asks the guitarist dryly, after taking a long draught of his drink. Gabrielle had been… “thoughtful” enough to bring Reinhardt his favorite stein, the one that’s roughly the size of a Bastion unit’s head. The Crusader looks at him skeptical, adding wryly, “I was expecting to drink and have fun tonight, Gabriel - not drink and contemplate ze meaning of life.”

“You’re in luck, friend,” Gabriel chuckles even as Jack continues to rumble-sing along beside him. The Strike-Commander smirks nonchalantly, saying, “There is no meaning to life, so that means all you gotta do is drink.”

“God, this got real depressing real fast,” Ana mutters, before downing the rest of her drink. Torbjörn titters on Gabriel’s right, murmuring, “Maybe I should call Helena…”

As Gabriel is glancing to the engineer, Ana sees her moment. Since she’s sitting the closest to Jack, she nudges his foot with her own. The SIC doesn’t stop hum-singing the words to the song, but he tilts his gaze at the sniper. Ana makes a pointed, patented pout at him, before gesturing lightly towards their commander with her head, dark eyes fierce on Jack’s. Jack’s feeling comfortably relaxed at the moment, and the song doesn’t bring his mood down the same way the others are reacting, but he sighs all the same, shifting a little against Gabriel as he growls, “C’mon, Gabe, it’s been a long week. Play nice with the audience.”

“Damn, not you too, Jack,” Gabriel chuckles, but his fingers shift against the strings. The music stops and the group sits in the sound of silence for a moment before the commander grumbles out, “Well? Any suggestions from the crowd?”
Ana hums lightly as Reinhardt looks contemplative. Torbjörn snorts something and Gabrielle just looks mildly amused. There’s no answers for a long moment until -

“I was left to my own devi-vi-iii-iiices -”

Jack’s deep, ocean-rumble of a voice rolls out against them like the tide as he sits up a little, projecting his choir-trained voice a little louder. Reinhardt immediately brightens, saying cheerfully, “Oh! I like zhis song!”

“Many days fell away with nothing to show -”

“I haven’t heard this since I was a girl,” Gabrielle says happily, “It was quite popular when I was very young.”

“And the walls kept tumbling down in the city that we looooved -” Jack says and sings and storms loud and clear as Gabriel’s fingers shift to the chords. The commander chuckles, explaining, “Not surprising - it’s one of his mom’s favorite songs.” Ana looks slightly confused but Reinhardt joins in, setting his stein down and starting to clap the beat. Torbjörn joins in a second later, clapping along as -

“Grey clouds roll over the hills, bringing darkness from aboooooove -” the SIC sings and even a few of the rurales fighters look up as Gabrielle joins in, singing along with the supersoldier in a voice like ringing bells, “But if you close your eyes -”

“Does it almost feel like nothing changed at all,” the rest of the Strike Team joins in, Reinhardt booming the loudest, which causes several people around them to jolt and Ana to giggle and snort slightly, and even Gabriel is grinning. Torbjörn groans slightly at the volumes of the Crusader’s tones, but even he is chanting along, as they all say, “And if you close your eyes - does it almost feel like you’ve been here before -”

“How am I gonna be an optimist about this?” Jack half-sings, half-asks as some of the kids, covered in splatters of different neon glo-paint, stop and stare. He thinks he spots Lucía among them, her dark eyes purple under the burnished glow of the lamps hanging from the Mission hallways. She grins at him vividly, vibrantly before rushing at him -

“How am I gonna - HEY,” the SIC shouts as she claps her paint-smeared hands against his cheeks before darting away, leaving bright pink handprints on his face. Jack is leaping to his feet, bolting after her as the kids scatter from him, screaming and shrieking. One of the nuns sinks her head in her hands. Gabriel laughs as brightly as the sun as Torbjörn guffaws. The other Strike Team members continue the song, even as Reinhardt offers a hand to Ana. The sniper smirks and takes it -

“We were caught up and lost in all of our vices -” Gabrielle sings high and clear and Torbjörn rumbles and grumbles as Ana and Reinhardt dance and sway slightly, the Crusader still bellowing along with the rest of the team, “In our poses the dust settled around us -”

“Arggggh, noooooo -” is the semi-distant cry from Jack, as the different kids smack him with globs of paint and he’s lit up like a speckled, neon-bright rainbow. Lucía is giggling wickedly at him - Gabriel is grinning -

He cannot stop smiling -

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Voy a vivir el momento
para entender el destino
Voy a escuchar en silencio
para encontrar el camino

[I am going to live in the moment
To understand the fate.
I am going to listen to the silence
To find the way.]

Y para qué llorar, ¿Pa' qué?
Si duele una pena, se olvida
Y para qué sufrir, ¿Pa' qué?
Si duele una pena, se olvida

[And why cry, for what? For what?
If a pain hurts, forget it.
And why suffer, for what? For what?
If a pain hurts, forget it.]

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**Strike: Beyond the Sun**

Thursday, July 6, 2051: 1611 (04:11 p.m.) - several streets west of the Laguna Verde Nuclear Power Plant, just north of the local government building, Dorado, Mexico

Time since arrival: 1 minute, 10 seconds

- the Spider Unit unleashes an unholy, otherworldly scream as it collapses off the side of the bright pink building -

- the plasma pulse has exploded its turret head -
it collapses into a cluster of rubble, the concrete painted pink but drip-drip-dripping red red red off the side, there is red upon red upon red flow-flow-flowing out from beneath it too -

“Keep going, Reinhardt!”

Jack is already rezeroing his focus ahead of them.

In the center of the cobbled, dust and rubble and red covered street, Reinhardt continues his steady march forward, his eyebrows furrowing as he concentrates hard on keeping his photon shield up, the blue light shimmering and wavering under the heavy fire. On the Crusader’s left, Gabriel twists his left shotgun down a side-alley, pulling the trigger and releasing another molten-metal blast into the half-shadows. The Bastion unit there screams something inhuman as the pellet explosion rips away part of its protective shoulder armoring - even as it revs its Gatling gun, a second shotgun blast ruins part of its turret-neck-joint and the entire gun collapses on the weakened support, sliding off and forward, exposing part of the blue-paneled computing core and -

The Bastion gives a strange, plaintive cry but -

Gabriel is already pulling the trigger.

The blue panel practically disintegrates as the burning shrapnel tears through it, like darts through sugar-paper.

Back on the right side of the Crusader, Jack is pulling the trigger on the heavy pulse rifle, feeling each sliding recoil against his shoulder as each bullet of lightning shoots through another Spider Unit’s turret-head, its screams rending the air only briefly before being engulfed in more shouts and shotgun explosions and the sheer background din of war.

The three of the main ground units are trudging their way down the narrow, winding street, just a block over from the main municipality building, pushing their way to the West Government Plaza, pushing for the center of the fight, the core of the battle. From what they could briefly discern when they had passed overhead before landing their ship on the northern outskirts of Dorado, the rurales fighters were barely managing to maintain an arc around the Power Plant, but the Omnic forces were squeezing squeezing squeezing in, pressuring the arc closer and closer to the plant and the seacliffs.

Gabriel had said they could try to crush a flank, break down one side of the Omnics’ counter-arc, but Ana had pointed out that the narrow streets and maze-like layout of the city were not conducive for that - that crushing one flank would not necessarily result in disrupting the rest of the Omnic forces, so long as they could make an offensive stand somewhere else in the city. Reinhardt had agreed with her, reminding Gabriel that flanking had worked well in their other urban battles, but that had been because they could rely on well-supplied, well-organized armed forces to maintain the line.

If the emergency broadcast was true, Jack had added quietly but forcefully, the rurales fighters were disoriented and disorganized -

They were rapidly being crushed as the Bastion and Spider squads - guided by the Quetzal Scout Units - out-maneuvered them and gunned them down from the alleys and rooftops.

“...We’ll run true open, urban warfare tactics then,” Gabriel had decided as they had landed the transport ship. “We need to get Reinhardt and his shield to the central point of the defensive arc as soon as possible - if he functions as an anchor point for the central platoons to rally around, and Jack has a focal point to deploy his biotic fields, we can work on pushing the boundaries back out when the center is stabilized. Torbjörn’s turrets will be as useful as ever. Ana can work on weakening a flank when we get to the center.”
And as the door had dropped in the cargo bay, the sounds of the battle had already hit them like a wave.

Gabriel had turned before them, stating calmly but with deadly, dark focus:

“Ready, Strike Team?"

“Ready, Commander,” the other four had replied in unison.

And now here they were -

Just over a minute and a half into the battle -

Making their way south-southwest to the West Government Plaza.

“Our north alleys are secure,” Torbjörn shouts at the three ground units as he suddenly reappears beside Jack, huffing as he pushes his short legs as fast as he can. The engineer skids in behind the Crusader, pouring more raw, molten metal into his specialty shotgun, growling out in his thick accent, “Four turrets securing our exit, all clear of troopers. Thought I spotted the nearest rural platoon too, but they were a block out from me. Didn’t wanna rush out there.”

“Good work,” Gabriel grunts, firing off another shotgun shell to their ten-o’clock position, ripping a Spider Unit rounding the corner of a building to shreds. The Strike-Commander calls out over the din of gunfire and shouting, “How quickly will your next set be ready?”

“Gonna need more scraps,” Torbjörn yells back, but Jack replies, “We got you a Spider unit and a Bastion ten meters back.”

“On it,” the engineer responds before darting back down the street to the north, but a sharp, clear voice cuts in over their shared comms:

“Three sentry Bastions in the Plaza,” Ana explains to them calmly, “I suspect there’s a fourth in my blind corner to the northeast section of the plaza - the corner you’re approaching - but I can’t get a better angle on all of them.”

They round into a short, dark east-west alleyway and -

The sentry Bastion there bweeps in surprise as the sudden blueness of Reinhardt’s shield and -

“Hammer down!” the Crusader shouts as - in a single, swift motion - he seamlessly flicks off the photon shield and slams the rocket-powered hammer into the ground. The whole earth shifts and rumbles beneath them, a wave of heat and pressure rolling off against the Bastion unit, which squeals and beeps as part of the street collapses beneath it, shifting its position into an awkward, uneven level and -

The Bastion is trying to shift to its regular mode, its limbs awkwardly unfolding themselves as it struggles to stand -

In a second, smooth action, Reinhardt twists his hammer again, blasting off a concussive wave of rocket-fire that causes the Omnic to scream scream scream and -

Jack is already flicking the switch on the auxiliary barrel.

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The three tiny helix rockets pop and fizz out of the end of the extra barrel, ripping through the air to
crash and explode against the Bastion, which screams screams screams again as it collapses backwards, slamming into the broken, shattered pavement and earth and -

Gabriel rushes past Reinhardt, twisting around the bulky Crusader with surprising grace and litheness, hurling himself head-on to the downed Bastion unit, seeing only the weakness in its joints, the armor plating that Jack and Rein have damaged, seeing a glimmer of that blue computing core panel in its chest -

“GABRIEL!”

Jack is pretty sure someone is screaming and -

Oh wait

It’s him.

He’s screaming.

Because as Gabriel darts forward, a Spider Unit clinging to the side of the bright green building on their right unfurls itself from just beneath the roof -

[Spider Targeting: ON]

Jack is pulling the trigger before his blueglass can even fully light up the diamond reticle.

He unloads one-two-three, one-two-three pulse shots into its turret head and, yeah, it only really needed four pulse shots but -

He won’t rest until it’s dead.

He won’t rest until anything that threatens their safety is dead.

( the screams of the distress call still echo in their minds - )

He won’t rest until anything that threatens this city, watered with blood drip-drip-dripping like strange red moss, lit with tarnished, burnished glows of belldrop lights, guided by underground rivers of lights and waters to the horizon where eternity meets the sea -

Is dead.

( gunfire and horror in the background of the distress call still echo in their minds - )

He won’t rest until anything that threatens their world, their new world they are building from the ashes to ashes and dust to dust of the apocalypse, their new world they are building under the sunstar that always shines, their new world that they are building for the good of all -

Is dead.

He won’t rest until anything that threatens Gabriel is dead.

Gabriel slams his boots into the uneven, broken concrete pavement, feeling the weight in the heels grind him steady as he levels both shotguns at that shimmer of blue upon blue upon blue in the Bastion’s chest plating -

The Bastion bweeps weakly -
He’s already pulling both triggers.

Both pellets explode with true, raw violence as they rip the remaining armor plating to nothingness, the blue computing core beneath them shattering and exploding into a thousand glass fragments and chips of motherboards. The recoils burn up each arm, but they’re good, they’re real, they’re a pure, indescribable force shuddering through him, and even with his enhanced strength and his planted weight, Gabriel feels his entire body shift backwards, combat boots grinding against the concrete as he slides ever so slightly back from the pressure of it.

...So maybe that was… a little bit of overkill.

“Will you stop -” Jack suddenly seethes by Gabriel’s right shoulder, the SIC grabbing at his arm slightly to pull Gabriel to face him. Jack’s blue eyes are clouded with the fury of the storm, and he half-growls, half-begs, half-pleads with heartbreaking fervor, “Throwing yourself blindly into danger?”

“I had to kill it while it was still down -” Gabriel snaps back as Reinhardt trudges closer to them, but Jack just retorts sharply, his soul still shuddering in his words, “Did you even see the Spider Unit up there?”

...Gabriel glances to his left, looking down at the pulse-riddled remains of the Spider Unit, muttering lowly, like smoke-engulfed sunshine, “I trusted you to have my back.”

“Gabriel,” Jack begins to growl, but Reinhardt just sighs loudly into the comms, “What es your status, Ana?”

“Still ready when you guys are,” the sniper replies to all of them, “Let me know when your shield is recovered and you want to make the push.”

“Which one do you want to focus on?” Gabriel says back to her as the ground units edge closer to the south end of this east-west street - the West Government Plaza is coming into view on their left as the three of them peek around the corner. It has the municipality building - bright, sunshine yellow - on the east side, the newspaper headquarters on the south side, and several more brightly-colored office buildings on the west and north sides. In the center, a broken fountain spouts a high spray of water in the air, drizzling and dazzling the courtyard with a heavy, heated mist.

They can just barely see the two southern sentry Bastions, positioned in the two corners at the end. From their alley way, they cannot see the one closest to them - it has to be on either side of the cross-street exit, waiting for them, and the northwest Bastion is well out of their view, probably on the other side of the building across from them.

“I can get either of the southern two,” Ana responds, “I can just barely see the edge of the core panel on the southeastern one.”

Gabriel pauses for a moment, before asking slowly, “Where is the nearest western ruralés platoon?”

“A block north and west,” Ana says, “I can confirm that this is the platoon Torb spotted when he set up his turret.”

“How many fighters?”

“I counted ten,” the sniper explains, “They are taking heavy fire from a squad of Bastions to the west, but are just barely holding out.”

“How many Bastions?” Gabriel asks her, assessing the situation as quickly as he can. He does not
like the solution taking place in his head but -

“I see three still standing in sentry mode,” Ana informs them, “The fighters are struggling.”

“...Torb, can you see our location?” Gabriel asks, and a beat later, the engineer’s gruff tones rumble to life over the comms, “Coming back right now, Reyes.”

“Jack and I will go to assist the platoon,” Gabriel explains, glancing at Jack, who makes a grim, bittersweet face but does not disagree. The Strike-Commander states to the team, “We need a coordinated attack, but we’ll need the extra firepower from the rurales fighters, any of them. When Jack and I have helped them rout the three Bastions there, we make the push into the Plaza. Ana, you’ll take the southeast one. The moment it’s dead, fire on the southwest one. Jack will be aiming for that as well. Reinhardt, Torb - you’re taking the one in the northeast corner. I suspect it will be on your left. I will take the one in the northwest with the rurales fighters. Understood?”

“Yes, Commander,” they say in unison, as Torbjörn rounds the corner at the other end of the alleyway. Gabriel looks Jack dead in the eye, stating, “Cover me, I’m going north around the building. When I reach the corner, you break for me, understood?”

“Yes, Gabe,” Jack mutters, and Gabriel glances to Reinhardt, adding quietly, “Don’t reveal yourself to the southeastern Bastion down the way, but have your shield ready.”

“Yes, Gabriel!” Reinhardt replies cheerfully as Torbjörn pulls up beside them, his personal forge steaming and chugging and churning out new parts for turrets.

“...Ana, move to a new position,” the commander tells her, adding on, “I need you ready to fire at the west Bastions fighting the rurale platoon and provide cover shots.”

“Understood, Gabriel,” Ana’s voice cuts into their ears, “Moving two buildings west.”

“Tell us when you’re ready,” he mutters, taking the brief pause to reload. He clicks his left shotgun to his back holster, slotting in another plasma-molten-metal pellet cartridge into the right one. Beside him, Jack continues to watch him closely, dark, breaking thoughts already starting to churn in his head and he murmurs to his commander, “...I should run with you.”

“I don’t think so,” Gabriel states coolly to his partner, switching to reload the left gun, “You’ll go second when they’re distracted by Ana and Reinhardt can cover you.”

“...My shield es already restored, Gabriel,” Reinhardt adds, about as quietly and as solemnly as they’ve ever heard him, but their commander just sighs, “If there’s a Bastion or Spider in that alley that we don’t know about, I would rather have Jack here to move with you and Torb as a unit than have our power halved unnecessarily.”

The other three soldiers share skeptical, borderline frustrated looks before -

“Don’t be a fool, Gabriel,” Torbjörn snaps at him and Gabriel glances at the small engineer in surprise, as Reinhardt growls, “You should let Jack go with you - you will need his pulse rifle if there es a surprise unit zhere.”

“The risk is mitigated if we both run after Ana’s cover fire,” Jack tries to explain calmly, coolly, yet intensely, his emotions surging and frothing in his chest like white caps on rough seas. He tries - oh, how he fucking tries - to get Gabriel to understand by saying with a low, deep, heart-aching rumble to his words, “Let me support you, Gabriel.”

Gabriel is focusing on the intense, almost desperately broken look on Jack’s face, but he does not
miss the shared glances of concerns between Reinhardt and Torbjörn in his peripheral vision.

“...Please, Gabe,” is all Jack can add, a soft-strong weakness to his words and -

“Fine,” Gabriel assents, before muttering almost vehemently, “But if I tell you to leave, you listen.”

Jack says nothing.

Gabriel scowls ever so slightly before asking with raw, smoking sunshine in his voice, “...You aren’t coming unless you agree, Jack.”

“...Understood, Gabe,” Jack agrees, but it’s painfully obvious to the four of them that he doesn’t particularly mean it -

“New position ready,” Ana informs them, “I have eyes on the platoon and the three Bastion units.”

Gabriel and Jack slide up to the western edge of the alleyway, peering out towards the south, watching the Bastion in the courtyard swivel its Gatling gun -

“The Bastion is ready,” Ana says and -

BANG!

A fraction of a second later, the sniper shot roars out over the battlefield, only a block northwest of the rest of the Strike Team -

The Bastion in the courtyard immediately twists its Gatling gun up, to the northwest, away from looking directly north -

Looking directly at their cross-street.

Gabriel and Jack go off.

They’re both bolting north up the cross-street, twenty - thirty meters, supersoldier enhanced carbohydrates and proteins burning in their blood, their muscles, their hearts, fueling their energies as their legs churn forward, they’re lurching up, rushing past abandoned cars and piles of painted concrete rubble, past red upon red upon red splattered across walls and pavement -

Gabriel and Jack - almost simultaneously - twist and skid to the end of the next east-west alley, the one north of the northern government office building and -

The sentry Bastion unit there b sweeps at them in shock.

Before it really has a chance to react -

They’re both pulling triggers.

Jack’s helix rockets flare down the alley way, bright blue in the half-shadows between the buildings, as Gabriel darts forward, rushing in behind their flaring light and smoke, using it to try and blind the Bastion as he surges forward, forward, closing that fifteen meter gap between them -

The rockets smash into the Bastion’s Gatling gun and it’s screaming screaming screaming as it shudders back slightly, and in the half-shadows -

They can hear the motor of the gun revving and -
Gabriel emerges from the blue smoke and shadows directly in front of it, blasting a shotgun pellet directly into its turret-neck-joint.

The Bastion bweeps sadly and painfully as the Gatling gun is ripped away from it, shorn to the side, slipping and sliding and exposing the blue control panel - normally on its back in sentry mode - through the gap in the front now and -

 Shotgun blast and plasma pulses shred into it -

 Shattering it like glass.

In a flash, Jack is back by Gabriel’s side, grumbling at him, “Why do you have to be so goddamn reckless -”

“We killed it, Jack,” Gabriel states to him, almost coldly, mechanically, “It’s dead. That’s all we needed to do.”

“Throwing yourself at it is fucking suicidal, Gabriel,” Jack snaps at him, dropping his empty pulse stock and slapping a new one into the barrel, but his commander just sighs deeply, muttering, “I do what I need to do, Jack. You know this -”

“You could let me draw its goddamn attention, Gabe,” Jack fires back and Gabriel gives him a confused scowl, asking dryly, “What - so you could take the bullets? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Gabriel -”

“Status, Commander?” Reinhardt’s voice cuts into the comms, as Torbjörn adds, “We saw the rocket explosion - are ya two clear?”

“We’re fine - caught it off-guard,” Gabriel says back to them as Jack reloads more of the mini-rockets into the auxiliary barrel. The commander asks to the sniper, “Ana, how’s your position?”

“Compromised, moving southwest slightly. Only two Platoon Bastions left though,” she informs them, but mutters lowly, “But the platoon is down to seven standing fighters -”

“Understood, we’re moving in on their position now. They’re up another block?” Gabriel asks as he and Jack move to the west end of the northern Plaza building. They come up on the cross street where the southwestern Plaza Bastion could potentially see them, but it’s twisting its head to the northwest, still searching for Ana’s new position.

“Yes - from your pinging location, you need to go north and west one more block and you’ll reach them,” Ana explains, “New position acquired, ready to fire when you are ready to run.”

“On three,” Gabriel says, nodding to Jack. The SIC inhale-exhales, before counting off, “One… two… three!”

BANG!

Another sniper shot rings out across the smoke and ash filled atmosphere of the city.

The southwestern Plaza Bastion jolts at the noise, shifting back to its regular humanoid form, walking backwards deeper into the shadows of its corner as it disappears from the cross-streets view -

Gabriel and Jack run.
They’re twisting back north, up the street, moving forward forward forwards before they turn to the left and dart into the next east-west cross-street and there -

There are three *rurales* fighters hunkered down at the other end - behind the shells of cars and dumpsters - as Bastion Gatling gun fire sprays against the western end of the street.

There’s a fraction of a second of shocked, still silence broken only by the scream, scream, screaming of Bastion Gatling gun fire on the end of the street.

“...*Hola,*” Jack states dryly as Gabriel cracks a wry smile, chuckling, “*La caballería está aquí* (tn: the cavalry is here).”

Jack gives him the deadest deadpan stare.

“¿*Los batallones*?” one of the fighters asks them hoarsely, and at that, Gabriel’s smirk flags a little. He often forgets that sometimes people don’t find the same sort of humor on a battlefield as amusing as he does.

“No, no somos los batallones de Portero* (tn: no, we are not Portero’s battalions),” Jack explains, drawing up beside the man, and Gabriel follows suit, joining them in a small huddle. The SIC looks the *rurales* fighter in the eye, saying with a surprisingly bright smile, “*Nosotros somos Overwatch* (tn: We are Overwatch).”

Now it’s Gabriel’s turn to give him a counter dead deadpan stare.

“...*How do* you manage to say that with a straight face?” the commander asks his partner, and Jack makes an expression that’s something of a cross between a scowl and an exasperated “I should have expected that” look.

“*Estamos aquí para ayudar* (tn: We are here to help),” Jack continues, as if Gabriel was not making the blankest, most skeptical face next to him. The three *rurales* fighters glance at each other with concern before one of them asks - her voice cracking slightly, “¿*Sólo ustedes dos* (tn: only you two)?”

“*La francotiradora está con nosotros* (tn: the sniper is with us),” Gabriel adds, forcing himself back into commander mode, switching back to the comms as he asks, “Strike team, we’ve reached some of the *rurales* fighters. Ana, can you see our location?”

“Checking...” her voice comes into them clear, “Yes, I can see your pings.”

“We’re gonna need you to help snipe that Bastion across from us,” Gabriel says as Jack checks over the wounds on the *rurales* fighters before cracking and activating a biotic field, planting it on the ground in the middle of their huddle. Relief and a touch of surprise immediately blossom on the three fighters’ faces. The Strike team commander scowls slightly as he thinks over his plan, “The second Bastion is north or south of the one across from us?”

“South,” Ana says, “I have a cleaner shot on that one from my vantage point, but I can still see the northern one.”

“How far south?” Gabriel asks as Jack turns to the *rurales* fighters, saying to them, “¿*Dónde están sus otras compañeros* (tn: where are your other companions)?”

“The southern Bastion is about...twenty meters south of the northern one,” Ana explains, “It’s at another cross-street angle. I do not know what your shot will look like on the ground.”

“*Ellos están allá, detrás del edificio* (tn: they are over there, by the building),” one of the fighters says, gesturing up the street towards the Bastion, and then making a motion to the right, northward.
“Between you and Jack, we should be able to handle the cross-Bastion with relative ease,” Gabriel says to their sniper, “We’ll have to assess how we move forward with the southern one once we clear it. Torbjörn, turret status.”

“I have the parts of one ready for assembly,” the engineer cuts in, “Body of the second one is coming out in a second.”

“How’s Rein’s armor and hammer?” the commander asks but both Gabriel and Jack suddenly wince as a voluminous voice suddenly snaps into their right ears:

“Do not worry about me, Gabriel!” Reinhardt jumps in as cheerfully as ever, and tears seem to water at the edges of Jack’s eyes, which would make his commander snort if he too wasn’t slightly tearing up.

“That isn’t - that isn’t what I was asking, Reinhardt,” Gabriel grumbles as Jack taps at some of the buttons on his earpiece, lowering the volume for Reinhardt’s channel slightly. At a more even tone, Torbjörn sighs, “I will work on his hammer.”

“My hammer es FINE, thank you very much,” the Crusader mutters back tartly and they hear the engineer snap back, “Oh, so that dent on the side is how it’s supposed to look, huh?”

“...My hammer es mostly fine,” Reinhardt corrects himself a second later, causing Ana to snort-giggle slightly and both Gabriel and Jack to smirk.

“...Uh, ¿soldados?” one of the fighters asks cautiously, “¿Cuál es el plan?”

“La francotiradora y el soldado rubio van a disparar ese Bastion (tn: the sniper and blonde soldier are going to shoot the Bastion),” Gabriel explains, causing Jack to scowl slightly over the descriptor his commander used for him, and when he turns a pointed look at Gabriel, he sees a mischievous glimmer in his partner’s gaze.

_Damn him_, Jack thinks with a chuckle, _He knows how to push all my buttons._

Even in the middle of what was shaping up to be one of the most brutal battles they would ever fight -

Gabriel still managed to see the light in the cracks between their pieces.

Gabriel still managed to make it feel like the sun perpetually shone down upon them.

“Cuando eso se hace, disparamos a la segunda - la del sur (tn: When that happens, we will fire at the second one - the south one),” Gabriel continues, “Necesitamos reagruparse con sus otras compañeros. Necesitamos recuperar la plaza del gobierno - nuestros compañeros están esperando en el lado este (tn: We must regroup with your other companions. We must retake the government plaza - our allies are waiting on the east side). ¿Comprende?”

“Sí, señor,” the fighters - and also Jack - say in unison. Gabriel grins, and then says into the comms, “Ready, sniper?”

“On your countdown, sir,” Ana replies. Jack hefts the heavy pulse rifle back against his shoulder, nodding to Gabriel.

“Corremos en uno...dos...TRES (tn: we run on one, two - three),” the commander snaps and -

Jack is on his feet -
Gabriel is beside him -

The three *rurales* fighters are rushing with them -

**BANG!**

Ana’s shot cuts across the sky.

Across the street, by a downed car, the sentry Bastion jumps, jolts, **flinches** as the bullet pierces into the side of its head and it swivels its gun-head to search for the source, scream scream screaming as the Gatling fire swings diagonal, swings up high and -

Jack bursts through the end of their street -

He’s already pulling the trigger.

The three helix rockets rip through the air, down the next street, **smashing** into the Bastion as it screams screams screams, and from behind the smoke, the *rurales* fighters are firing on it with their own standard pulse rifles, peppering into the exposed core as the Omnic squeals and shrieks and dies.

And then all five of them are diving behind the building to the north as the southern Bastion - at a sort of cross-angle from where they had been hiding - turns towards them.

The other four *rurales* fighters there suddenly blink at the group in surprise.

“Changing positions,” Ana says to them over the comms, “I think I can get a better spot for the southern one.”

“Understood,” Gabriel replies as they duck behind a dumpster and a semi-smoking truck, turned on its side in the north-south street and making a pseudo-barrier. The other four *rurales* fighters are hunkered down behind it, watching their sudden appearance with anxiety mixed with shock.

“...*Regresamos* (we’re back),” one of the *rurales* fighters - seemingly the leader of the small platoon - says to the four of them dryly and one of the others - part of the group they had just rejoined - replies just as dryly, “*Podemos ver eso* (tn: We can see that).  ¿*Quienes son* (tn: who are they)?”

“Overwatch,” the leader says and the other four look stunned, one of them muttering, “...¿*Son reales* (they’re real)?”  Another *rurales* fighter asks with some confusion, “...¿*Sólo ellos dos* (only the two of them)?”

“*Hay más de nosotros* (There are more of us),” Jack responds with a dry huff even as Gabriel chuckles, his voice like smoke-engulfed sunshine to Jack’s ears.  But Gabriel’s eyes are focused on the section of the street just south of them.  They’re at an odd, almost five-way intersection here: the north-south street that they’re on, the east-west street they had just been down, and then a small, fifth cobbled street, almost more like a pedestrian pathway that the remaining Bastion is positioned on.  They’re ducking behind a skewed, bullet-riddled dumpster and the sideways truck, but there’s not much more cover they can take in their southward push - another shell of a car about fifteen meters out from them, but if they make that charge, the Bastion will have a clear view to gun down anyone who crosses the intersection.

And that doesn’t account for any possible Spider units that might be lurking in the buildings.

...But if they can get to that cover -
There’s a break in between the apartment buildings -

A walkway that leads directly east-west to the Bastion’s position.

A plan takes shape in his head.

A risky plan.

“...Ana?” Gabriel asks solemnly, in a tone of voice that gets Jack to flick his gaze towards his commander with fierce concern. Because Jack -

Jack knows.

Jack knows better than anyone what that tone means.

“I’m here, sir,” Ana says back, “New position ready.”

“Here’s the plan -” Gabriel starts, seeing her new position ping on his small map in his blueglass, “I’m going to make a break for the car. When I drag its attention, you fire at the neck joint. The moment its focus is back on you, Jack is going to rally the rurales fighters from the intersection. When it’s distracted, I’ll move in between the south apartment buildings to get close. Ana, you’ll fire your second shot on it as I get close to finish it off, assuming that combination doesn’t kill it to begin with -”

“I don’t fucking like this,” Jack growls lowly next to him. Gabriel tilts a cool, level-headed gaze to his partner on his right, saying slowly, “I don’t care if you like it or not, Juan, this is our best bet to minimize risks without trying to get around it -”

“We can try flanking it from the cross-street.” Jack argues back, his blue eyes snapping like lightning. Gabriel scowls right back, muttering in his light-dark voice, “So what - so you can attract whatever Spiders are hiding out down there? We know they have to be hiding out somewhere nearby - we’ve got one Bastion squad guarding the plaza, another squad that was here - we still don’t know where the remaining two Bastions are hiding. Every two Bastion squads come with a Spider squad. We’re looking at two Bastions in unknown locations and three, maybe four Spiders nearby.”

Jack falls silent, but his eyes are still as stormy as ever. Gabriel sighs with mild frustration, “We know from the defensive arc the remaining Bastions of this squad have to be westward, Jack - rushing the cross-street means you’re probably gonna run right into one of them down at the other end.”

“...At least let me go with you -” Jack starts to say, but Gabriel gives him a fierce glare, murmuring sternly, “I need to you to anchor the fighters when Ana’s shot goes off.”

“You can explain that to them -” Jack says, before turning to the leader of the platoon, “¿Como se llama, señor?”

“Hector,” the man responds and Jack gestures back to Gabriel, grumbling, “Explain your plan to Hector, Gabe - he can lead them perfectly fine -”

“I want your heavy pulse rifle and biotic fields here, Jack.”

The rest of Jack’s words die in his throat.

Gabriel is looking at him with an open and honest expression, with a faintly bittersweet smile:

“Keep them alive, Jack.”
“...Yes, sir,” Jack says slowly, resisting the urge to run run run with Gabriel, to take his place on this insane plan, to -

“Mi comandante va a correr (my commander is going to run),” Jack starts explaining to Hector and the other rurales fighters as Gabriel inches closer to the edge of the dumpster, saying into the comms, “Ready, Ana?”

“...Yes, Gabriel,” the sniper says to him, “...Be careful.”

“Cuando escuchamos el tiro de la francotiradora (when we hear the sniper shot),” Jack continues, trying to fight every urge and instinct and old habit to stay with Gabriel, “Saldremos y empezaremos disparar. La francotiradora disparará otro tiro (We will go out and start firing. The sniper will fire another shot).”

Gabriel clips both shotguns to his back.

He holds up a right hand to Jack.

Jack falls silent.

The urge to run run run surges inside him -

“I’m going, Ana,” Gabriel shouts into the comms, darting forward, sprinting, sprinting, refusing to look as he passes into the intersection -

There’s a distant bweep down the cobbled street -

BANG!

In his peripherals, the Bastion down the street jolts slightly with the sniper shot.

Gabriel goes.

Jack tears his eyes away from Gabriel’s rushing form, jumping out from behind the dumpster, roaring to the edge of his vocal chords, “¡VAMOS!”

Even as the other fighters are jumping out beside him -

Jack is already pulling the trigger.

The Bastion bweeps in further surprise - its Gatling gun swerved up, firing into the building behind Jack - but it shudders under the plasma pulse shocks one-two-three, one-two-three, Jack skidding out partway into the intersection. All around him, more light pulse shocks rip into the Bastion, it screams screams screams as -

Gabriel ducks behind the shell of the car, pressing into his comms as he slides into cover, shouting, “Pull back, Jack - fall back to cover.”

Jack jolts at the voice in his ear, shouting out, “¡Retiremos (retreat)!” instinctively on Gabriel’s command. Even as he shouts, he’s already twisting, practically throwing himself back behind the dumpster, the fighters falling in around him as Gatling gun fire shreds the truck on the other side of the street.

Back behind the car in the intersection, Gabriel grabs his shotguns again, adjusting his grip as he says to his team, “Ana, Jack, I’m ready to move back in.”
“Give me a countdown, Gabriel,” Ana says, “I’ve adjusted one room over.”

Gabriel rushes to the south corner of the first apartment building, peering out at the Bastion through the break in the complex. He can hear the Bastion beeping something -

“One...two...THREE!” Gabriel calls out, running out in between the buildings -

The Bastion stops beeping its S.O.S. code and swirls its gun towards him -

There’s a flash of an emotion -

Something indescribable -

Fear mixed with adrenaline mixed with joy -

That lights up Gabriel’s soul -

BANG!

The Gatling gun shifts as another sniper shot pierces its neck-joint, there are blue sparks snapping and fizzing from the gaping wound -

Jack is back out in the intersection -

He’s already pulling the trigger.

One-two-three -

Right into the exposed part of the Bastion’s neck.

The Bastion bweeps a strange cry -

At six or seven meters away -

Gabriel hears whatever parts of the Gatling gun are still connected rev -

But he’s already pulling the trigger.

His right shotgun jumps in his hand as the blast explodes against the Bastion’s “head” and neck and shuddering “wound.” The Omnic screams screams screams as its Gatling head slips and falls and there - there is the exposed blue control panel and -

Gabriel’s left shotgun fires.

The Bastion’s entire body shakes and rolls and shivers as the blue glass disintegrates under molten metal and small sparks of red plasma. There’s one last almost sobbing cry as the Omnic’s body shudders and collapses into a relaxed recoil.

But before its tremors have even fully stopped -

Gabriel is already torquing around -

Bolting up the pedestrian street to the intersection where a look of sweet relief blossoms on Jack’s face and -

You gotta mask your emotions better than that, Jack, mi corazón, is all Gabriel has time to think, because the words actually coming out of his mouth are:
“Go go go! Government Plaza now!”

Jack can feel his face shift emotions - from bittersweet happiness to a deepened scowl - as Gabriel’s words hit him, and he’s already turning back towards the rurales fighters, shouting back, “¡Vamos! ¡A plaza de gobierno!” Even before Gabriel has reached the intersection, Jack is bolting to the street where they had found Hector and two of his fighters hunkered down, and through the comms, he hears his commander speak in short, urgent words:

“It started an S.O.S. code,” Gabriel explains to his team as he brings up the rear of the platoon, “I think we may have stopped it in time, but we can’t risk it - if it summoned a Quetzal Scout, you can bet it’ll rally the nearby troops to the Plaza. The Bastions benefit from open spaces, we need to clear it out now.”

“Understood, sir!” Reinhardt’s voice echoes in their comms and Ana states boldly and clearly, “Moving back to my original position. Am I still taking the southeastern one, Gabriel?”

“We’ll stick with the plan for now,” Gabriel says as Jack, the rurales fighters, and himself all move down and over a block, until Jack signals to them all to stop. They’re on the “western” north-south street, peering back down into the Government Plaza. Gabriel takes the brief pause to start reloading his guns - Jack doing the same with the heavy pulse rifle - even as he snaps into the comms, “Here comes the review. Jack, repeat my words to the rurales fighters.”

Jack nods to him, before turning to Hector and stating to the platoon, “Instrucciones -”

“Ana will take the southeastern one, Reinhardt and Torbjörn will move for the northeastern one - remember, I think it will be on your left -”

“La francotiradora disparará el sureste, nuestros compañeros matarán el noreste -”

“Jack, you and four of the rurales fighters will take the southwestern one - remember that it moved. Myself and the other three will take the northwestern one.”

Jack winces slightly at the mere mention of the mere idea of Gabriel rushing yet another Bastion, but even as his thoughts waver, his words do not:

“Hector, usted, tres otros compañeros y yo vamos a disparar al suroeste. Los otros tres y Gabriel atacarán el noroeste -”

“Jack, before you begin firing, deploy a biotic field once we reach the end of the street. Torbjörn, the moment your Bastion is dead, begin building a turret in that corner -”

“Already assembled and ready for deployment, Reyes,” the engineer cuts in sharply, and Gabriel smirks, adding confidently, “Should’ve known you were one step ahead of me. Ana, when your Bastion is dead, assist Jack on the southwestern one. The sooner that one is dead, the sooner Jack can assist my group on the northwestern one.”

“Yo pondré un campo biótico cuando atacamos (I will place a biotic field when we attack).” Jack continues to Hector and the fighters, who are watching him intently, “Nuestro compañero pondrá una torreta - no le hará daño (Our friend will place a turret - it will not hurt you). Cuando el suroeste está muerto, mi grupo atacará el nortoeste (When the southwestern one is dead, my group will attack the northwestern one). ¿Comprende?”

“Sí, comandante,” Hector replies, before he starts to sort the other six fighters into the two groups and -
“Are you ready, Ana?” Gabriel asks as Jack nods beside him. In the comms, the ghostly sniper responds a second later, saying, “I am in position, commander.”

“Reinhardt, Torbjörn?” the Strike Commander mutters to the other two ground units, and Reinhardt huffs back, “Let us fight them, Commander!”

“¿Listos?” Gabriel says to the rurales fighters, and Hector nods, answering solemnly, “Sí, estamos listos.”

Gabriel does not ask Jack. Because he knows. He knows.

Jack has been ready to follow him -

*Nine years, five days, ten hours -*

Since the moment they met.

Beside him, Jack’s eyes are as ruinous as blue thunderstorms and hurricanes.

He shifts the heavy pulse rifle back against his shoulder.

Gabriel shifts his ready shotguns in his hands.

He inhale-exhales.

He lets the rush of joyfear, terrorexhilaration *burn* inside him.

“One...two...THREE.”

The moment the word leaves his mouth -

They are already moving.

All nine of them - Strike-Commander and SIC, platoon leader and fighters - are rushing down the street. Jack is already pulling the trigger, the three helix rockets whizzing out of the auxiliary barrel, roaring the forty meters down the street to the southwestern Bastion partially-concealed in the shadows of the plaza buildings, which bweeps distantly as the explosions smash into it and -

BANG! ...BANG!

Two sniper shots ring out in quick succession, immediately followed by a loud crash-crunching sound to the east, and the bellowing roar of a familiar Crusader launching himself into battle and - Jack remains focused.

He *goes.*

He’s still pulling the trigger.

Beside him, as they duck and swerve and run their way down the street, Hector and the other three fighters he chose are blasting pulse shots into the southwestern Bastion, which screams, attempting to swivel its Gatling gun up towards them -
BANG! ...BANG!

There are two more sniper shots, but the second one pierces into the southwestern Bastion, its Gatling gun rattling loose slightly -

They’re nearing the end of their fifteen meter stretch of the street, about to enter the plaza proper -

The most dangerous part of their push.

Jack stops firing -

To grab a biotic field from the clip around his waist -

He’s already snapping the button -

As Gabriel and the other three *rurales* fighters dart past him and his group.

Jack hurls the biotic field on the ground as their group comes directly to the northwestern corner of the plaza. The four buildings make a square with the broken fountain in the center still spraying misting-water into the air, causing fractal rainbows to shine out in the slow sunset just barely beginning to form, red and orange, gold and pink, amber and purple in the western edges of the smoke-laden sky. Directly across from them the southwestern Bastion is shuddering under plasma lightning pulse blasts and -

Gabriel feels the warm, healing feeling of the biotic field bolster his aching soul and -

Gabriel pauses.

Ever so briefly.

He listens...listens…

For a brief, almost imperceptible moment -

Against the background din of war -

He hears the Gatling gun nestled in the northwestern corner stop.

Gabriel goes.

He’s ripping out into the northwestern corner in the plaza, blindly trusting the others to do their jobs, to do what they must, as he twists to the right and -

The northwestern Bastion bweeps in *utter shock* - mid-reload - as he appears between it and Reinhardt and Torbjörn at the other northern corner and -

It is twisting its Gatling gun - only a meter away from Gabriel’s chestplate, mere papier-mâché and cardboard compared to its burning bullets but -

Gabriel can see that it is still mid-reload -

He smashes his left shotgun against it, steering it up and to the left, at a diagonal into the air, away from himself, away from the others rounding the corner behind him and -

He slams his right shotgun into the neck-joint of the Bastion -
He’s already pulling the trigger.

The first blast - fusion-heated metal fragments *obliterating* the fragile, “supposed to remain hiding” paneling of the neck-joint as the Bastion *screams screams screams* practically inside his head, that’s how close they are - but before the full recoil of the first shot has even fully-traveled up the full-length of his right arm, his enhanced reflexes are pulling the trigger again, again - shots two and three -

It takes only a fraction of a second but -

He can *feel* the Gatling gun - wedged up against the butt of his left shotgun - shudder and slide as his blasts literally decimate the internal joint supporting it.

All around him, there are lightning shocks and sparks of rifle pulse fire spraying into the Bastion, which *sobs* weakly -

Wires snap, metal shreds, blue sparks fly and it’s all he can see hear feel in the moment and -

There.

Surrounded by flayed metal upon shorn plating upon cracking screenglass -

Is blue.

The blue “consciousness computing” core.

Bright bottle blue, bright seaglass blue, bright underwater light blue.

Blue as bright as Jack’s eyes.

He is already pulling the trigger.

It shatters.

The glow of life fades from it.

Gabriel drinks in the sight of the light dying.

It takes him nearly a full second - nearly a full second of pure, enhanced endorphin-fueled rush dying down in his soul and veins - to realize that his left thigh is

*Pain pain pain pain pain*

As the Bastion shudders and slides into a smoking, metal heap, Gabriel winces in the sudden quietness of momentary peace, gingerly putting his weight onto his right leg, before glancing over at the bullet wound on his left. From the smaller size of it, he can tell it’s not a Gatling gunshot, but a slightly-smaller caliber submachine gun one and -

Before Gabriel can even fully process his own reactions -

Jack is by his side.

“Stay still,” the soldier-medic is saying to his commander, dropping by his left leg even as Gabriel turns slightly, glancing out over the small slice of tranquility in the plaza, a stillness broken only by the showering of the water and -
They have to keep going.

“The southwest one shifted - it tried to escape in that last second there, but before we killed it it got you and one of the fighters -” Jack is explaining, the deep rumble of his summer storm voice soothing the burning, sunflared rush of Gabriel’s mind, dousing it ever so lightly in a healing warm water that is liquid life to his soul, and the commander finds himself saying the words distantly, “Are they okay?”

“Their medic is working on them - stay still, Gabriel,” Jack sighs, and Gabriel feels - distant and long and numbed with supersoldier drugs - the small, sheer kevlar-cutting scissors snip away, first at his outer pants, and then the body armor beneath, widening the hole so that Jack can -

Jack glares at the deformed submachine shot lodged shallowly in Gabriel’s deep, regal skin.

The Bastion had been careless with its shot.

A small, uneasy comfort. A tiny, bitter nourishment for his soul.

Jack is dropping the fabric scissors into the med kit and retrieving the -

Gabriel feels - distant and long and numbed with supersoldier drugs and pure joyfear - the tweezers dive into his shorn skin and even as twinges of pain ripple up and down his leg, his focus is on everything else, he’s saying into the comms:

“Ana, regroup with us. Torbjörn, begin scavenging. I want the two of you heading to our southeast to help the next set of rurales fighters there. Reinhardt, you will come with Jack and take this platoon to the west - this plaza will be the base of our operations from here out. Hector, ¿dónde está el siguiente pelotón (where is the nearest platoon)?”

The rurales fighters are coming to stand by them, as Reinhardt and Torbjörn move in from the northeastern corner. Gabriel flinches slightly as he feels Jack remove the bullet, followed by the the cold, stinging spray of the biotic fluid over his wound.

“Cuando la vimos por última vez (when we last saw them),” Hector starts, glancing to Jack as Jack pulls out the pre-threaded stitches needle pack from the med kit and, with steady fingers, begins to pull the protein-string through Gabriel’s shorn skin. The Strike-Commander makes a small grimace on his face, but otherwise nods to Hector. The platoon leader continues slowly, “Estaban tres calles al oeste de aquí (they were three streets to the west of here).”

Jack sprays on the protein sealant as Reinhardt and Torbjörn come to stand beside him. The Crusader tutters slightly as the engineer huffs, still working on assembling his next turret, before he starts pulling metal pieces from the northwestern Bastion’s body.

Suddenly, a lithe, blue figure rushes into the plaza from up the north-south street and -

“I’m here,” Ana says to them, but her polite mask falls away into a pout-scowl as she sees Jack apply the bandage to Gabriel’s leg. The sniper snorts with frustration, “You already got shot, Gabriel?” “I don’t need your sass right now, Ana,” Gabriel grumbles as Jack slams his med kit shut, clearly furious, but choosing to stay quiet. The Strike Commander turns to his sniper, asking her sharply, “Where’s the best vantage point from here out?”

“For which direction?” she replies immediately, back into sniper mode, and Gabriel says, “Mainly to the west. I want to begin planning our pushback.”

“It’s flat for another...five or six blocks,” Ana says to him as Torbjörn pours some of the molten
metal into the turret leg cast. The sniper’s gaze is cool and focused on Gabriel’s own, as she says, “But then you start hitting the streets in the foothills. This western building here.” Ana gestures to the building on the west side of the plaza, some sort of five-story office structure, “... Is probably your best bet for now.”

“Good, I’m heading up there,” Gabriel states, glancing at it before looking to his team.

His family.

“...We’re running standard ops here,” the Strike-Commander says to them, “Torbjörn, Ana, head to the south-southeast. Torbjörn, begin blocking off streets with your turrets there. Ana, I want you to accompany and protect him, but your focus is on sniping down any Quetzal Scouts first and foremost. When you encounter more rurales platoons, you are to inform them that Overwatch is capping the arc to the west. Ana, if you need assistance on the Spanish, Jack will help you.”

“Understood, Gabriel,” Ana says to him as Torbjörn growls, “Very well. Gonna be rough to make that many turrets on the fly. I’m already running low on computing components.”

“Hold out, Gabrielle told us on the transport ship she’d be here in twenty minutes. Aim for quality over quantity if you must,” Gabriel says to him, before the sniper and the engineer salute and then turn and rush to the southeastern corner of the plaza. The Strike-Commander glances at Reinhardt, explaining, “Expect the usual, Reinhardt. You’re going to head slightly to the west - you’ll follow Hector’s directions until I can give you better ones. Don’t charge unless Jack or I give you the order.”

Reinhardt makes a small pout over that, his blonde eyebrows diving into a slight furrow until Jack sighs, “Unless it’s an emergency, of course.”

“...Very well. I will be patient,” Reinhardt mutters, tossing his long, blonde ponytail slightly. Gabriel looks to Hector, saying coolly, “Hector, de ahora en adelante, su grupo actuará como mensajeros (for now, your group will act like messengers). Su compañeros se quedarán en parejas - no sólo (your comrades will be in pairs - not alone). Comenzará a decir a los otros pelotones que Overwatch está en el centro, y ellos vendrán a nosotros (You will start telling the other platoons that Overwatch is in the center, and they will come to us). Ustedes y ellos irán a Jack para ayuda y instrucciones (You and them will go to Jack for help and instructions).”

Hector nods, before Gabriel turns to Jack.

They know.

They know before anyone else does.

They know that Jack is furious with these instructions.

But still.

They know he will follow them.

Because Jack has been prepared to follow Gabriel -

Nine years, five days, ten hours -

Into hell and back, to the edges of the earth, to the ends of the apocalypse, ashes to ashes, dust to dust -
Back to back -
Side by side -
Hand in hand -
Since the moment they met.

Gabriel looks to Jack.
Jack awaits Gabriel.

The Strike-Commander says to his SIC, to his partner:

“You will lead the *rurales* fighters. You will relay their information to me, and my instructions to them. Where I cannot see, you will give them commands. And I’m trusting Reinhardt to you as well. When I have made a map and a general plan, I will return to you and Reinhardt, as will Ana and Torbjörn. You have twenty minutes before Gabrielle and her aides enter our airspace. Use your supplies judiciously.”

Jack inhale-exhales.

He is ready.

Gabriel awaits Jack.

“...Understood, Gabe,” Jack says to him in his low, storm tones, giving him the faintest smile -

Like looking up at light from under water.

Gabriel clicks his shotguns to his back, before holding out his right fist to Jack, returning his seabreeze smile with his own sunshine smirk, saying both strongly and softly, “*Estoy contigo.*”

“...*Y yo, contigo,*” Jack replies, grinning back before knocking his own fist against Gabriel’s.

And then -

They go.

Gabriel bolts past them to the office building, throwing himself into the ground floor through a broken window. It takes his eyes a half-second to adjust to the dimmer shadows of being indoors, but he quickly spots the stairs on the side and darts to them -

Back outside in the plaza, Jack roars at his team, “Alright, everyone - we’re moving west! Reinhardt, we’re taking this cross-street. *Hector, su grupo se dividirá en pares. La última persona se quedará conmigo. Patrullarás las calles - irá al norte y oeste* (Hector, your group will divide into pairs. The last person will come with me. Patrol the streets - go north and west) -”

They’re moving westward, down the east-west street running out of the northwest corner of the plaza, and as Hector breaks off his team into pairs, Reinhardt’s shield flares to life. In their comms, Jack hears Ana’s voice chime in, “Gabriel, Jack, we have located a platoon. Torb and I will help destroy the Bastions and then inform them of the situation.”

“Good work,” Gabriel says, continuing his rush up the stairs, going round and round and round,
taking two steps at a time, fighting gravity that threatens to drag him down. He reaches the fifth floor, but rounds up the last flight of stairs to the roof, blasting the lock on the firedoor with his left shotgun and kicking it open. He rushes to the roof and -

Up here -

It’s no skyscraper -

It’s far shorter than almost every building in Los Angeles or New York or even Montreal or even Giza or even Ibadan -

But up here -

Gabriel somehow feels like the sky is closer than ever.

He sees the rest of the city, stretching west west west, into steep, verdant hills, tumbling upwards against the grain, against the flood of the trees of the mist and smoke laden forests, like bright blocks of dyed sugar cubes sweeping upwards to the oil-painted skies, the colors bleeding red and pink, gold and orange, amber and purple as the sun begins its slow descent into the jagged, green horizon. Here, smoke and drones and haze clouds everything, even parts of his vision but -

Gabriel moves to the western edge of the roof, and crouches down.

Most of the buildings around him are two, maybe three stories at most, so while he doesn’t have an amazing vantage point, he can still see some of the winding layout of the streets. Here and there, rattles of Gatling gun fire and Spider turret bulletstorms shake his ears and the painted smoke-dust off of buildings, and more than that -

He can see the jade-green Quetzal Scouts soar and swoop through the air, their trilling calls organizing their assigned Bastion and Spider squads.

Below him, he sees Reinhardt’s blue blue blue shield shimmer and shiver as the Crusader marches out from the side alley north of the office building. There’s a single rurale fighter with him, alongside that familiar soldier with a shock of gold-blonde hair, hefting the heavy pulse rifle against his shoulder. Up a little ways, Gabriel spots some of the other rurales fighters from Hector’s platoon - split into pairs like he said - move north-northwest and -

There’s a small explosion about three blocks west of Reinhardt.

“Jack, Reinhardt, keep heading straight. You’re probably going to encounter those two missing Bastions from the squad that fought Hector’s platoon,” Gabriel informs them, clicking his shotguns back before reaching into his side pocket and -

He pulls out two torn, slightly-rumpled notebooks, a pen clipped to each one.

“Be careful,” Gabriel says to the comms, “I see a Quetzal Scout just to the southwest of where Hector’s platoon had been holed up.”

He sets both notebooks on the ground, one beneath each hand.

He flips to where the pens are clipped to new, clean pages and -

Gabriel inhale-exhales.

He takes a pen in each hand and -
Gabriel goes.

His left hand begins scrawling out rough lines and curves, drawing out a rough map of the layout of the section of the city that he can see, even as his right hand begins writing “Hector - HE1 - seven” to record what information he knows -

“Gabriel,” Jack says, listening to the rurale fighter - Flora - as she relays information to him through her comms with her squad. The SIC continues looking forward, through Reinhardt’s shield, but states to his commander, “One pair is reporting a platoon north five blocks, by another plaza. Led by Sofía.”

“SO1,” Gabriel says back to him, adding “Sofía - SO1” to his righthand list, before glancing back to his lefthand map - still looks good - before glancing back over the city and adding three more rough squares to the northwest as he asks, “Numbers?”

“Getting word of eight members left.”

He adds “eight” to the list.

“Ana, position?” Gabriel asks, glancing to the blue ping labeled [Amari] in his blueglass. She’s down…almost 200 - 250 meters south-southeast of him -

“We’re five blocks southeast,” Ana says back in his ear, and Gabriel shifts slightly, looking south before his left hand sketches in some of the streets there. The Strike-Commander asks her, “Name and number?”

“Platoon leader is Felipe,” Ana says, as Gabriel writes “Felipe - FE1,” before the sniper adds, “Ten members here.”

He adds “ten” to the list.

“Do they know how close the next platoon is?” Gabriel asks her, before he catches a glimpse of Reinhardt’s blue shield moving closer to where the small explosion had been. He snaps to Jack, “Jack, Reinhardt, play it safe, you’re coming up on some Bastions there - might be in tank mode.”

“Understood, Gabe.”

“Felipe says the next platoon is south three more blocks,” Ana replies and Gabriel begins his instructions, “Okay, you have a Quetzal-led Bastion platoon directly west of your position. I can see it about…six blocks over. Secure the next rurale platoon, combine their numbers. When Torbjörn has secured the southern platoon’s position, you are to get up into position and snipe down the Quetzal. With your combined numbers, you should be able to take on the Bastions in the Quetzal’s platoon as long as you go slow. Once Jack and Rein have secured their section, they can send some members of Hector’s platoon south to the rurales fighters in between your spots.”

Even as he’s speaking -

Gabriel is writing the words on his righthand page.

“Once we’ve eliminated some of those damn Scouts, we can create a unified front with runners from each rurale platoon for communication,” Gabriel states to his team, “You will tell each platoon to designate a single pair - never an individual, always have them move in twos - to devote all their energies to running relays north-south. Jack is their anchor point. We cannot rely on any sort of open channels - they will be dropping EMPs once they catch on that we’re killing off their Quetzal Scouts.”
Gabriel finishes connecting the separate parts of his map, assessing the rough drawing critically before determining that it is acceptable for his purposes. He clips both pens to the pages again and stuffs the notebooks back in his pockets, saying to the comms:

“Our supply ship is inbound in seventeen minutes. We have no idea where Portero’s forces are. We cannot bank on our wonderful friend the United States for assistance. I do not need to stress the importance of this power plant to you all, but we need to keep that in mind at all times.”

But -

Before anyone else -

Jack knows.

Jack speaks into the comms before anyone else, saying in his roiling seastorm voice:

“If Dorado suffers any more losses...it may mean the end of Mexico and Central America as we know it.”

Gabriel quiets as Jack murmurs with heartbreaking tidal wave to his words:

“...It is not nuclear energy that will win this war. It is the fighters here. It is the people of Dorado. They are trusting Overwatch with their lives, with their very futures.

“We must defend that at all costs.”

There is silence on the comms, but suddenly Gabriel grins, as he reloads his shotguns:

“Well said, Jack.”

Gabriel smirks, heading to the door to the stairs, a shotgun in each hand as he chuckles:

“Let’s give them hell, team.”

“...Yes, Commander!”

---------

As the last round of “Ey-ey-ey-ey-o’s” dies down and the last echoes of Reinhardt’s thunder-crackling booms fade across the roll of the sea and the blue nightfall darkness, as the tide and winds drift in ever so lazily, as Ana and her knight continue to swirl and dance, as Jack fake-falls onto the grass, covered in splatters of brightly-colored glo-paint, Gabriel grins - he cannot stop grinning - there’s something surprisingly infectious in the stardust night air and -

For the first time since he’d picked up the guitar, he stops strumming.

Next to him, deep into a cup of something strong, Torbjörn gives him a confused look, and next to the engineer, Gabrielle quirks a skeptical eyebrow but he -

Gabriel begins a different beat, clapping his hands in a steady rhythm -

As if on instinct and reflex and habits nearly ten years old now -

From where he’s lying on the green courtyard -

Jack also joins in on the clapping beat.
Standing over him, Lucía looks confused, also smudged and covered in neon paintdrops. Jack smiles brightly at her, asking, “¿Conoces esta canción (do you know this song)?” The girl shakes her head, and Jack sits up, gesturing to her with his clapping hands and, after giving him a suspicious squint, she beams at him and starts clapping too -

On the bench, Gabriel tilts his grin to Torbjörn and Gabrielle, saying, “This is one of my mother’s favorite songs. She liked to sing it when she was feeling low.”

“Is that so?” Torbjörn asks but he stops when -

Gabriel begins to sing.

“Voy a reír, voy a bailar - vivir mi vida, la la la la -”

[I’m going to laugh, I’m going to dance
To live my life, la la la la]

His voice is not the roll of summer storms or the rumble of an ocean tide like Jack’s, nor the earth-shattering chants of Reinhardt, nor the softer, clearer singsong calls of Ana, nor the rowdy, deep gruff tones of Torbjörn but instead -

His voice is the sweet haze of sunshine drip-drip-dripping through oil-painted skies, red and orange, gold and pink, amber and purple. His voice is a fire with a soft trace of smoke, it is fusion with the playful edge of a sunflare, it is a smirk made into a song, a smile made into a sound, like lights that shimmer across the surface of water.

In the center of the courtyard, Jack joins in the chant of the song with his own hazy, humid deep summer swelter voice:

“Voy a reír, voy a gozar - vivir mi vida, la la la la -”

[I’m going to laugh, I’m going to enjoy
To live my life, la la la la]

And suddenly -

From around the courtyard

Rise more voices

Of every tone, of every hue, of every shade.

There is laughter in their tones, whispers of “Esta canción es tan antigua (this song is so ancient),” murmurs of “Sus acentos son tan americanos (their accents are so American),” but it is all worth it for the weightlessness of the moment, for the joythril that rises in Gabriel’s heart and -

The air is already lighter.

“Voy a reír, voy a bailar - vivir mi vida, la la la la. Voy a reír, voy a gozar - vivir mi vida, la la la la.”

Still grinning and singing, Gabriel switches back to his guitar, strumming out the chords and in a flash, Jack is suddenly back by his side, singing along and -

Jack smirks smugly before smudging a bright, neon blue glo-paint smear on Gabriel’s nose -
“Voy a reír, voy a bailar - vivir mi vida, la la la la. Voy a reír, voy a gozar - vivir mi vida, la la la la.”

And in this moment

They are

so warm

so unconditional

so everlasting

so complete.

This moment perfects them

Smudged in neon glo-paint, surrounded by songs and laughter, warm voices and the roll of the sea, the light of the pale, blue-whitegold moon and tarnished, burnished belldrop glimmers, as Ana begins to show Reinhardt a sort of leaping, swirling dance, as Torbjörn says something to Gabrielle and she chuckles deeply -

As Jack beams brightly at Gabriel, like water reflecting light -

And Gabriel grins back at Jack

Drinking in the perfection

Of everything they are

Together.

--------

A battalion soldier leaves the courtyard, drifting away from the cheers and laughter and lightness of the song behind him. Even as he wanders through the main part of the Mission, he hums to himself, singing slowly under his breath -

“Y para que llorar, pa’ qué - si duele una pena, se olvida. Y para qué sufrir, pa’ qué - si así es la vida, hay que vivirla la la le -”

[And cry for what, for what?
If a pain hurts, forget it.
And suffer for what, for what?
If that’s life, then it must be lived.]

“...What was that?” the voice in his ear comms device asks him, and the soldier just sighs as he leaves the Mission, heading up the slight incline of the street, murmuring, “Nothing, nothing -”

“What are they doing now, agent?” the annoyingly familiar and frustrating voice asks him, and the soldier now scowls at the stars before replying with a sly smirk to his tones, “They’re singing, amigo - want me to sing it to you too?”

“...No, you don’t have to -”

“Are you sure?” the soldier-agent teases, adding wryly, “My accent is more accurate than Gabriel’s.”

“That is extremely not necessary,” the voice snarks, but then sighs, “Please, just - can you just focus
for once -”

“Hey, you’re speaking to the best in the business here,” the soldier-agent retorts, heading to his left up the street towards the main Mercado plaza. He snorts with slight derision, “What do you take me for - some kinda amateur? I’ve only been doing this for five years now.”

“Four years and nine months,” the voice corrects him and the soldier-agent sniggers, chuckling back, “Well, well - look who’s counting.”

“Enough. If Overwatch is doing nothing important, we need you to head to Portero’s camp -” the voice starts but the soldier-agent sighs with exaggerated verve, “I’m already on my way, jefe - I don’t need you to tell me twice.”

He maneuvers through the crowded Mercado plaza, filled with volunteers and soldiers and fighters and tents, filled with shouts and laughter and more singing, filled with the brightness of tarnished, burnished belldrop lights and the distant twinkle of frozen raindust stars.

And still, under his breath, without the voice on the comms hearing him -

He sings lightly to himself:

“Voy a reír, voy a bailar - vivir mi vida, la la la la. Voy a reír, voy a gozar - vivir mi vida, la la la la.”

---------

(Voy a reír, voy a bailar)
¿Pa’ qué llorar? ¿Pa’ qué sufrir?
Empieza a soñar, a reír
(Voy a reír, voy a bailar)
Siente y baila y goza,
que la vida es una sola
(Voy a reír, voy a bailar)
Vive, sigue, siempre pa’ lante,
no mires pa’ atrás

[(I am going to laugh, I am going to dance)
Cry for what? Suffer for what?
Start to dream, to laugh!
(I am going to laugh, I am going to enjoy)
Feel and dance and enjoy
For this life is the only one]
(I am going to laugh, I am going to dance)

Live, go, forever move forward

Don’t look back]

Chapter End Notes

And the rest, they say -

Is history.

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Next week: An ending...and a prelude?
The reaper returns to his main Talon base in Zaragoza, Spain, and discovers a "gift" from a friend.

And in the middle of the night -

A new character takes center stage.

I'm...really struggling to find the words that fully encapsulate how I'm feeling right now. I'm not sure I have the emotional energy to write them all.

"Old Habits" has been a personal project of immense undertaking, and I am absolutely stunned and floored that people have enjoyed it so much. I know it has been a long, wild ride, and I am beyond grateful to everyone who has read it the whole way through. I am especially grateful to my beta reader, starsherit, for encouraging me and being patient with me in times when I struggled to sort through everything. They are my rock and words will never be enough to say what they mean to me.

I am so deeply appreciative of all the comments and kudos here. I know that I have been difficult to react, or have not always responded mainly due to my schedule or lack of emotional drive, but believe me, all of them have been much loved. So many of them had made me smile after a hard day, and believe me, I'm SO IMPRESSED that so many of you continued to read even during the harder fight or battle scenes.

So here we are.

Remember -

Every ending

is simply a New Beginning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Segador: This is Not an Epilogue**

Sunday, July 11, 2076: 10:18 a.m. - Talon Zaragoza base, Spain

He feels miserable.

Fuck trains.
Reaper stumbles out of the cargo hold of the Transatlantic Transport ship, his legs stiff and aching from the five-hour flight. He trails behind several other Talon asshats, all of them groaning and moaning, and squints against the harsh sunlight over the airfield.

*I'm gonna go throw up in Gerente’s potted plant*, he decides, forcing himself to keep moving to the base proper. He doesn’t even remember if Gerente has a potted plant in their office but he figures that if they don’t, he can wing it and throw up in a desk drawer instead.

As the slick electronic doors part for him, Reaper enters the cool but slightly artificial air of the base itself, but he’s grateful to be out of the grating sunlight at least, and he hears his datapad ping. He pulls it out of a side pocket, looking at the alert:

[[The.Reaper] has checked in at [Zaragoza.Base]]

...*Fuckin’ creepy*, Reaper thinks, about to pocket the damn thing again before he remembers.

He taps over to the messenger and writes out:

[The.Reaper]: The torrija was pretty fuckin good

[...]

[Sombra]: I knew it

[[Sombra] has taken a screenshot.]

[The.Reaper]: gdi

[Sombra]: so would you say

[Sombra]: that you really

[Sombra]: ATE those words

[The.Reaper]: listen

[The.Reaper]: I just spent like eight hours in fuckin death boxes traveling at breakneck speeds

[The.Reaper]: I don’t fuckin need this shit rn

[Sombra]: …

[Sombra]: well I mean

[Sombra]: you need A LOT of things

[Sombra]: like a sense of humor for one

[The.Reaper]: i’m leaving

[Sombra]: some fucking professional help is another
[The.Reaper]: listen
[The.Reaper]: Talon ain’t known for their stunning healthcare plans okay
[The.Reaper]: now if you excuse me
[The.Reaper]: I have a date with something called a nap
[Sombra]: …
[Sombra]: are they attractive at least
[The.Reaper]: u lil shit
[Sombra]: I’m sure they have a nice personality
[The.Reaper]: I will literally get back on the damn ship
[The.Reaper]: just to fly all the way back over there
[The.Reaper]: just to kick your ass
[Sombra]: what
((Sombra): I thought we were friends, Gabe))
[The.Reaper]: BRO
[Sombra]: oh shit wait
[[Sombra] has deleted a message]
[The.Reaper]: ...wait what can you do that
[Sombra]: ...well I can
[The.Reaper]: ...no, no this is good, this is very good
[Sombra]: look
[Sombra]: you don’t gotta sound so fucking supervillain about this
[The.Reaper]: ...have you met me or

---

He’s been semi-moving down the hallways as he’s writing stuff, making his way back to his room. A notification pings that money is already being transferred to his EncryptID account, which he guesses is fine, but what he really wants is a fucking nap and maybe a massive glass of water.

He doesn’t really know if either of those will help with his condition, but he also doesn’t really give a shit at this point.

Reaper grunts a hello to Francesca and Henri as he passes by them, and they give halfhearted waves back. He reaches his room and is about to punch the lock code in the keypad when something gives
him pause.

He scowls, kneels down, and inspects the six pack of Guinness cans by the foot of his door.

_The fuck?_

There’s a small slip of paper stuffed into one of the holders, and Reaper gingerly pulls it out between pinched claws. He unfurls it, and reads:

“This is all I could find, _salaud…_ but I did not try very hard.”

Behind the mask he both smirks and scowls.

_That’s it - she’s getting the 2 euro box wine next chance I get, Reaper decides, lifting the case from the ground. But then he looks at it a little longer, before thinking, Well… _Guinness is pretty good for an easy-to-find stout._

_Maybe I’ll get her the 3 euro bottom shelf wine instead._

---------

_Him pause.

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---------

_Depois que o primeiro homem_

_Maravilhosamente pisou na lua_

_Eu me senti com direitos, com princípios_

_E dignidade_

_De me libertar_

_Por isso, sem preconceitos eu canto_

_Eu canto a fantasia_

_Eu canto o amor, eu canto a alegria_

_Eu canto a fé, eu canto a paz_

_Eu canto a sugestão_

_Eu canto na madrugada_

_Take it easy, my brother Charlie_

_Pois eu canto até prá minha amada_

_Eesperada, desejada, adorada_

_Take it easy my brother Charlie_
Take it easy meu irmão de cor

[After the first man
wonderfully stepped on the moon,
I felt I had rights, principles,
and dignity
to liberate myself.

Because of this, without prejudice I sing,
I sing of fantasy,
I sing of love, I sing of happiness,
I sing of belief, I sing of peace,
I sing of suggestion,
I sing in the dawn.
Take it easy, my brother Charlie,
because I sing to my love,
awaited, desired, adored.

Take it easy, my brother Charlie,
take it easy, my brother of heart.]

--------

**Synesthesia** (also spelled *synaesthesia*; from the Ancient Greek σύν syn, "together", and αἴσθησις aisthēsis, "sensation") is a neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. People who report a lifelong history of such experiences are known as *synesthetes*.

**Chromesthesia** or *sound-to-color synesthesia* is a type of synesthesia in which *heard sounds* automatically and involuntarily evoke *an experience of color*. Individuals with sound-color synesthesia are consciously aware of their synesthetic color associations and perceptions in daily life. Synesthetes that perceive color while listening to music experience the colors in addition to the normal auditory sensations that would be triggered in the average person.
As with other variants of synesthesia, sound-color synesthesia can be divided into groups based on the way the colors are experienced. Those that 'see' or perceive the color as being in the external space are often called *projectors*, and those that perceive the color in the mind's eye are often called *associators*, but these terms can be *very misleading* in terms of understanding the true nature of the experience. For most synesthetes, *the condition is not wholly sensory or perceptual*.

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**Sinesthete: Prelúdio**

Saturday, July 10, 2076: 11:38 p.m. - in the middle of the Rocinha community, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The song of the night is brightly colored.

It is the dazzling lights of Rocinha itself, flowing down the side of the mountains and hills like sweet stardrops fallen from the blue nightfall sky. It is the harmony and notes and beat popping colors - greens and golds and oranges and blues - in his head and eyes and heart. It is the hum and chatter of the crowd, a song and a sight, a hymn and a hope, lightsong that threads from the voices and radiance of the people around him.

The song of the night is Rocinha itself.

Lúcio will never tire of see-hearing it.
Lúcio will never tire of experiencing it.

The beat pulses pulses pulses in the palms of his hands, and even though the lightsongs starblind parts of his vision, he can still see the crowd of people - painted in every note, sung in every hue - moving along with the beat. They flood the immediate area around the roof of Estela’s apartment complex, hanging out on other rooftops, in the narrow, winding alleys between buildings, in yards and small plazas, everywhere. Just as colors and sounds blur and blend and remix themselves together, so do the people: many are wearing the gold and green that Lúcio himself sports - in Brasil shirts, in the frog wristbands on their arms, in glo-sticks and necklaces. Behind the beat of Rejuvenescência, he can hear the lightsong of their voices, talking and chatting, building a chorus of togetherness that only adds to the music.

Hmm.

_Eu deveria remixar isso_ (I should remix this), Lúcio thinks to himself, amping up some of the bass and spinning the techno-light track back several seconds to repeat the main chords. In the corner of his eyes, he sees Estela lift her head at the change in his track. Her face, normally a beautiful bronze-mahogany in the day, now burnished with the gold-green lights of the protest concert, makes a small expression of confusion, but she shrugs to herself before turning back to the group beside and behind the turntable, her thick, black curls bouncing lightly. Beside her, the lean, semi-scraped Omnic Jordao is saying something in his electronic tones, something that Lúcio can’t quite hear over his own music, but whatever it is, the Rocinha Omnic rights leader is obviously passionate about it, gesturing emphatically with his hands. Across from him, Lúcio’s dj mentor Paulo nods along, his dark eyes and coppery-red skin flaked with a light dust of melting greens and lifesong golds, his fingers ruffling at the coarse, greying hair of his scruffy beard - as he usually does when he’s overthinking something. Next to him, the ever-patient, ever-coolheaded Juliana, current manager of the Rocinha branch of the Clínica de Família Maria Oliveira da Costa and Lúcio’s direct supervisor, scowls as she thinks over whatever it is Jordao is discussing, her hazel gaze extra green in the swelling lights of the song, her slick dark hair shimmering with the radiance around them.

There are others with them - Camila and Daniel, Fernanda and Luiz - but they sit farther away from Lúcio, just beyond his peripheral range, fading into the lights popping slightly with music on the edges of his vision. He sighs slightly to himself. He doesn’t like missing out on the rally meetings - he always wants to help contribute his fair share - but part of playing the host is putting on the performance, and trusting his friends and team to sort out a new plan without him. Lúcio spins in the other techno-light track, slipping in undertones of “We Move Together As One” - as he does so, the gold stardust light of Rejuvenescência melds with the new jeweled emerald tones of “Together,” the green bubbling up like biofluorescence beneath the surface of gold liquid life.

Tonight’s set up is not too far from his own apartment complex - just a few winding streets up and over from Rua Dionéia, in the middle of the sweep down from the hills below the Dois Irmãos mountains. The greens of the trees - so vibrant, so rich during the day - have dulled into a background velvety softness, the backdrop for the swelling sea and rivers of lights that flow and move and sing through the hills, shimmering out through steep, cliff-cut, concrete apartments - through windows, doorways, streetlamps, cars. The apartments are bold and bright and beautiful during the day, painted every hue of the rainbow, even hues Lúcio knows he could identify down to the note. There is no human language that could perfectly capture the names of all the colors - only music, only stardrop songs could ever sing the colors perfectly.

And at night, when the sun drops its red and orange, gold and pink, amber and purple oil lights into the blue upon turquoise upon abyssal navy of the sea -

That’s when the lights of Rocinha rise -
Brightly colored by day.

Brightly lightsung by night.

They had picked Estela’s apartment complex for this night. It hadn’t been terribly difficult - his friends had gone around and gotten permission for the set up from the neighbors in the surrounding complexes. At this point, though, there was almost no one in Rocinha who hadn’t heard of Lúcio and his cause -

At this point

There was almost no one in Rocinha who didn’t hate Vishkar.

So once they had cleared it with the people of this area of Rocinha, they had gone about spreading the word. Vishkar kept taking down the Rocinha Comunidade Radio speakers, claiming they were “an illegal nuisance anyways,” but “magically” they were always back the next morning, connected to the RCR’s studio in central Rocinha through some technological wizardry from Jordao and “good ol’ fashion duct tape” from Bento.

“Queime isso (tn: burn this)” Bento had said proudly, as he finished layering another strip of duct tape - layer number eleven - on some of the wires on a speaker-streetlamp on Estrada da Gávea. Lúcio had given him a skeptical look, his skeptical face shifting into a sarcastically playful smirk, replying with a shrug, “Ainda não os parou (tn: it has not stopped them).” Bento had waved a thick hand towards the musician, dismissing him jokingly before they moved onto the next one.

Balancing all the important aspects of his life was getting steadily more and more difficult - between escalating work at the clinic, escalating speeches and dj-ing at RCR, escalating their midnight light-barrier-sabotage and speaker-restoration projects, escalating the number of concerts and rallies during the week, escalating their livestreaming capabilities -

Well -

It was starting to feel like Lúcio was juggling too many balls at once.

But still.

Não para, não para, não para

Não.

He will not stop until he gets answers.

He will not stop until Vishkar leaves his community alone.

He will not stop until his friends and his family, his listeners and his patients, his fellow workers and revolucionários

Are free

From the oppressive light-barriers and deafening silences threatening them at the foot of the hills, at the edge of Rocinha, at the place where the rivers of lightsongs flow towards the blue upon blue upon sunset sea.

Behind the lights and notes, behind the glows and chords, Lúcio scowls to himself, shifting the techno-light tracks more towards “Together,” fading out parts of “Rejuvenescência,” the green of
speed and movement filling in the night sky as the gold of liquid life fades to a softer hum. He’s about to switch in Sonhos Omnicos when Bento’s deep, rumbling voice crackles in over the earpiece:

“Lúcio, eles estão aqui (in: they are here).”

Lúcio glances up, trying to focus his gaze past the haze of the colors of the lightsong, looking down the slope, down the chunky, squared apartment complexes and buildings, down over the rivers of the crowds of people, down to the edges of the concert, where Bento and some of the other members of the capoeira group are “bouncing” the perimeter -

Where, barely - just barely -

He can see sky blues and hyacinth purples and “Utopaea” whites beginning to congregate.

Lúcio outright glares now.

In his peripherals, he sees Estela and Jordao and Paulo lift their heads as well, as Juilana stands to look, but Lúcio waves them off, saying over the thrumming beat, “Eu vou (I’m going).”

He quickly spins the techn-light tracks to repeat and then -

He hops over the old dj table.

If he used conventional means, getting through the crowd to the base of the hill would be like fighting upstream against a river - exhausting, tedious work.

But Lúcio was born of freedom -

Of air -

Of wind and water -

Of light and song.

Lúcio twists to his left and starts to run, moving past the people at the edge of the dj table, building speed speed speed until he launches himself off the edge of the apartment complex to the next building only half a meter away, rolling across part of the roof with ease. He pulls himself back up and moves like liquid through the crowd, seeing the breaks in their ebb and flow, seeing a quick step on a vent opening. He dodges a few more people, places a lithe step on the thin metal, before hurling himself to the next building down.

His capoeira-trained muscles know what to do - keen instinct and old habits and lightning reflexes he has built with power and speed and the melody of the lightsong in his heart, in his head, in his world -

He leapfrogs his way down the hillside, jumping from building to building, using telephone poles and walls to grapple onto and slide down -

Bento and two other capoeira fighters - Joao and Vitoria - jump slightly when Lúcio plops down beside them.

But the others -

The three Vishkar “enforcers” -
Are not remotely surprised.

Sinistros, Lúcio thinks bitterly as he rises. Bento, João, Vitoria, and the Vishkar enforcers are all taller than him, towering over him like the mountains tower over Rio, but Lúcio knows, he knows, he knows -

The sky does not fear that which cannot touch it.

The sky cannot be lorded over.

“You lidar com isso (tn: I will deal with this),” Lúcio says to Bento and the others. Bento gives him a hard look, the stern expression making his earth-tone face glimmer at strange angles under the uneven lights, but the “bouncer” says nothing, trusting Lúcio to do what he can -

To do what he must.

“...Lúcio,” one of the Vishkar enforcers - a tall, poised man with sharp features, bronzy skin looking extra gold under the green and yellow lights, his red screenglass partially obscuring his eyes - says with open disdain. Even with the red screenglass, Lúcio can see the enforcer’s dark eyes bore down upon him and he -

“What are you Vishkar doing here?” Lúcio snaps right back, squaring himself up towards the man, folding his arms across his chest. In an act of solidarity, Bento and the other two follow suit, also copying the pose. Lúcio frowns heavily at the enforcers, muttering tartly, “Vishkar’s property line ends five-hundred meters east of here - this is Rocinha right here. You have no authority in these parts.”

“...Our employees and renters were complaining about this...noise pollution,” the Vishkar man says with blatant disgust and Lúcio tilts his head in mocking, furious frustration, demanding, “‘Noise pollution?’”

He lets the silence fall over the small group and - even though there’s light chatter from the edges of the crowd, the music itself is only a distant beat-beat-beating this far down the hill.

“...Do your employees and renters have ultrasonic hearing or something?” Lúcio teases the enforcers, but there’s a green-gilded anger to his tone, “You can hardly hear the concert from here, let alone in that sound-proof building you built.”

“You are to cease this illegal music activity immediately,” a second enforcer, a tall brunette woman with rich coppery skin and a slick blue screenglass visor states boldly, but Lúcio just snorts, “You are not the police, and this is not illegal - I received permission for this from all the nearby tenants. Everybody approved.”

Lúcio glances over towards Bento, who nods affirmingly, and the dj twists his face back to the enforcers, smirking smugly as he chides them, “As far as I can tell, this concert is - what do you Vishkar say? - ‘perfectly in order.’”

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“Your entire ‘community’ is out of order,” the third enforcer - a slightly bigger, slightly more muscular man than the first - sneers, and Lúcio does not miss how he places a hand on his photon projector (merely a ‘tool,’ Lúcio snorts to himself). The third enforcer growls sinisterly, “All favelas are illegal.”

“Excuse me,” Lúcio cuts him off, his tone edging on red-red-red razor sharpness, “We were here first, we have been here as long as Rio has existed, and we survived the Crisis here. This is our land, these are our hills, this is our neighborhood. You are the ones overstepping your boundaries - the city
council gave you half a square kilometer to develop on, and you have illegally extended your property into Rocinha by nearly two-hundred meters."

Now - finally, *finally* -

The enforcers gawk at him in surprise.

Because Lúcio speaks several languages - Brasilian Portuguese from his mother and siblings, the language of song and music, rhythm and rhyme from Paulo, English from school, from Overwatch agents before the disbandment, from Juilana and the other clinic nurses and technicians he has worked with, the language of lights and sounds - a language that seemingly only he speaks, a language that he shares with the mystic world of synesthesia around him, hanging over his senses like a cloud of sunfall mists and life, and now -

And now -

The language of numbers, of maths, of square meters and legal properties, the language of boundaries and angles and distances -

As he watches the threat of disquiet quiet, the threat of the sound of silence, the threat of engulfing abyssal emptiness formed from hard-light photons and barriers, hem and haw and gnaw at the eastern edge of his world.

A language he learned in frustration, in anger, in growing sorrowful rage - deep reds and dark blues - as he tried to fight the mountain that threatened to chain the free sky, the sweeping hills, the lightsongs of the night.

A language he learned to fight back against them -

In their own terms.

In their own words.

Lúcio would bind himself to every human and Omnic language if it meant setting his friends and his family, his listeners and his patients, his fellow workers and revolucionários Free

From the tyranny of hard-light burning, grinding sounds, from hard-light barriers blocking off streets, from hard-light “employees” refusing to pay service workers their fair share, from hard-light “employees” treating them like trash, from hard-light “employees” demanding that friends and family, listeners and patients, workers and revolucionários change to their whims.

The fury of entering his apartment room - the furniture completely trashed, his dj-ing and music equipment systematically broken, his murals he'd painted on the walls burned with obvious hard-light singe marks - still flames bright red-red-red in his soul.

The fear of being pressed against a pink concrete wall, late late late in one lightsung night on his way back from a night shift at the clinic, as a dark, non-Brasilian voice had whispered threats of violence against his ear, something sharp and red-edged and cold pressed against his jugular - that fear still radiates orange-orange-orange in his head.

The revolução of rage and anger, sorrow and hope, growing like a seed - given life by water and sunlight, hymn and lightsong, earth and sky - in community meetings, in the strengths of their bonds, growing stronger stronger, faster faster, deeper deeper, even as their land shrinks, even as the edges
of their world are pressed against, are stolen from them -

The song of revolução lights in his heart.

*Não para, não para, não para*

*Não.*

“...I know what you did in Utopaea,” Lúcio says to them, his voice shifts between a whisper and a snarl, “I know you Vishkar think you can hide it, but I know - I have done my research. There was another city there, another community a lot like ours - and you Vishkar swooped in and crushed it. ‘The Jewel of Vishkar?’ More like a diamond cut with blood -”

“Silence,” the first enforcer nearly-shouts at him, and red-red blips on Lúcio’s vision in a flash, causing him to wince slightly, but he -

He will not show fear -

Even if he can physically see it.

“You think I do not know?” Lúcio demands back, raising his own voice, feeling the rage-anger-sorrow-hope swell like a song in his soul, “You think I do not see what you are doing? We all see it! We all know! And we will not back down! This concert is not yours to stop! These streets are not yours to ‘enforce!’ You will return to your building right now or we will force you to!”

Beside him, Bento cracks his neck threateningly, and Lúcio hears João and Vitoria shift behind him as well. More members of the crowd are starting to notice the situation, and some of the people on the edges drift in closer to them, murmuring in tones that are increasingly orange-red-angry.

The three enforcers share glances of small fear.

The third one has not taken his hand off the projector gun.

Lúcio glares between the three of them, demanding, “What are your names? I will be speaking to your ‘bosses’ tomorrow...and members of the city council -”

“They won’t listen to you,” the female enforcer snaps at him, “Rocinha is not legal -”

“They’ll listen to Maria Oliveira da Costa,” Lúcio states with a bold threat. The Vishkar enforcers fall still. Oliveira da Costa was a well-known WHO agent -

And a good friend to world-famous doctor Angela Ziegler.

Both doctors still held much social power in global politics, with the ability to rally other medical professionals to their causes, and the ability to make waves in the world.

Militaries, security companies, agencies - groups the world over practically begged for doctors like them to “take their sides.”

But the thing about people like Maria and Angela -

Women who inspired Lúcio into action -

Is that their objectives were never for profit, never for their own gains - always, always for others, for those in need of help -
Always for those in need of mercy.

Juliana had said Maria was already aware of the increasingly-desperate situation in Rocinha, that she was starting to give talks, collect supplies and resources, that she was coming back to Brasil by the end of the month -

But still -

Lúcio knows.

He knows.

He knows that might not be soon enough.

He knows.

He knows children are already going missing.

No one can prove Vishkar is taking them but -

The red-orange fear fear fear beats in his heart-head-soul and Lúcio knows -

Something must break this stalemate.

Something must shift the tides.

Something must break the mountain of hard-light, steel-cut buildings that is threatening to chain their lightsong skies.

The revolução is coming.

*Não para, não para, não para

*Não.

The wind must make ripples in stone.

He will not stop, not stop, not stop -

Not until his beat beat beat makes ripples in hard-light, steel-cut stone mountains.

“I will do what I must to reach Maria tomorrow,” Lúcio says with green-gold verve but the third enforcer -

He gives Lúcio a wild, vicious, sinister smirk.

Lúcio pauses -

Because -

“You will be doing nothing tomorrow, little DJ,” the enforcer says, unclipping the projector gun from his belt. Beside him, Bento shouts something, readying his fists and behind him the others shift and stir, the small crowd is chanting something -

“Lúcio, Lúcio, Lúcio -”

But Lúcio pauses because -
The third enforcers lifts the gun even as the female enforcer snaps a hand to his shoulder, saying fiercely, “No, we are not supposed to use them yet.”

Lúcio’s eyes trace over the projector -

It is not a photon projector gun.

It’s something different.

It...almost looks like a small speaker or megaphone, big and bulky around the man’s hand, but flaring out into a rounded, sunk plate of red red red light. It looks nothing like the other, sleeker tools most Vishkar employees and enforcers use and Lúcio briefly has a fraction of a second to think -

*Prototype?*

When the Vishkar enforcer suddenly clicks a button.

There is a fraction of a second where his brain processes nothing.

And then -

**RED**

**RED**

**RED**

**RED**

**REDREDREDREDRED**

The sound sound sound *wails and screams and burns burns burns* - it bleeds bleeds bleeds flooding red-orange-pink light across all his senses, Lúcio feels it in his head and heart and veins and nerves, shuddering through him like a wave smashing into his face, engulfing his eyesthroatlungs and he’s *screaming screaming screaming*, he cannot get enough air, there’s only burning burning burning red red red light light light sound sound sound and his entire body is being dragged, clawed through, shredded as every sense is *lit on fire* -

He distantly - distantly - hears the shouts and screams of other members in the concert crowd as the sound breaks through everything, shattering the green-golds of the lightsong with red red red red red, everything is red red red red red, the color invades his world and Lúcio is screaming screaming screaming -

He thinks he hears Bento call his name -

Before -

*White*

*White*

*White*

*Empty numbness* -

Before he collapses.
[A New War Begins]

[New Hero - Now Playable:]

[[Lúcio Correia Dos Santos] joins the battle.]

Name: Lúcio

True Identity: Lúcio Correia Dos Santos

Title: Sinesthete

Age: 25

Affiliation: Rocinha Communidade Radio, Clinica Familia de Maria Oliveira da Costa

Languages: Brasilian Portuguese, English, augmented Omnic

Nationality: Brasil

Weapon of Choice: Nothing...yet

Unique Traits: Chromesthesia (when the senses intermix sounds and colors), capoeira fighter, nurse/medic

Recent Biography: Lúcio Correia dos Santos was born and raised in the Rocinha community of Rio de Janeiro, deemed “the largest favela in Brazil.” He is a chromesthesia synesthete - he sees sounds and hears colors. His synesthesia is primarily uni-directional (sound to color), but on rare occasions (particularly when stressed or tired) he may suffer from bidirectional activations, which can impact his ability to function on a daily basis. When the city announced the development of a new city center and apartment complex building, encroaching on the land of Rocinha, Lúcio used his radio DJ-ing as a platform to spread his message of resistance and togetherness. When the Calado Corporation blew up, Lúcio began encouraging his listeners to demand answers and seek out the truth from Vishkar. In more recent months, Lúcio has started hosting community concerts to bring people together and get community leaders to sit down and formulate plans moving forward. Vishkar has fired back, sending out groups of “enforcers” to put up hard-light barriers to block off streets and “control traffic,” and to destroy the RCR speakers for “spreading illegal noise pollution.” In an effort to gain a larger audience and seek out help, Lúcio began streaming his concerts and protest speeches online, steadily gaining the attention of “international stars” like Hana “D.Va” Song, Reinhardt Wilhelm, and HAL-fred Glitchbot. When he is not DJ-ing for the radio, Lúcio works as a nurse and technician at a local family clinic. He just recently completed his first full album, but has been too busy with his anti-Vishkar work to try and promote it.

Chapter End Notes

"Lúcio, comin' at you!"
"Vamos lá galera, essa é nossa!"

Who's ready for some Lúcio-oh-oh?

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Back when I decided that the gameplay was "canon" to this version of Overwatch, it actually felt extremely intuitive to write Lúcio as having synesthesia. If you are unaware, Lúcio's "in-universe" album is called "Synaesthesia Auditiva," meaning "Auditory Synesthesia." Lúcio’s in-game abilities lend themselves well to this idea, as he is capable of seeing his own music and actions being "played" in brightly-colored lights. This appears to be a highly-stylised, "gameplay-heavy" version of a version of synesthesia which intermixes lights, colors, and sounds.

I am not a synesthete, so this version of synesthesia is based on accounts both from friends, tumblr followers, and online articles. I recognize that it is a highly romanticized view of synesthesia. It will certainly not be accurate to many people who do have that type of perception. However, in trying to understand it, describe it, and "match" the gameplay, I tried to reach a middle ground that bridged all three, while still remaining as authentic to Lúcio's character, his interactions, his backstory, and his motivations.

If there are any readers who have synesthesia, and would like to assist me in writing Lúcio as a synesthete (such as by describing your perceptions or views), please feel free to leave a comment here, or message me on tumblr or twitter!

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Are you guys ready for Part 2 of "And Overwatch For All" - "New Wars"?

Since it's been four weeks (holy hell, I cannot believe it's been that long) since we last saw them, here's a brief reminder: in Chapter 28, Reaper and Soldier: 76 both individually left Dorado after their confrontation, parting ways with Sombra and Alejandra respectively. Reaper returned to his main base in Zaragoza, Spain (this chapter) and Soldier: 76...

He left for Brazil.

The (mis)adventures of Reaper, Soldier: 76, Sombra, Widowmaker, Ana, Reinhardt, Winston, Genji, Zenyatta, Fareeha, and all the others will continue, along with several characters who were deliberately "missing" or had more minor roles in "Old Habits." As with "Old Habits," “New Wars” will be predominantly Reaper76-focused, with the same other ships in the background. We should start hitting some familiar territory and events pretty soon once it starts.

To be completely honest, I've had to rework the timeline of the longer plot to adjust it a little more closely to the canon timeline, and this set me back from starting the sequel in earnest. However, I've finally squared everything up - I'm currently about 5 chapters into drafting it. I'd like to write the majority of the first arc before I start posting it. Here's the plan for now:

Next week (Sept 22): I will probably skip this week to take a short break and focus on drafting as much as I can.
Week after (Sept 29): [Interlude 1 - (Don't Fear) The Reaper] will go up.
Week after (Oct 6): [New Wars] will likely start.
With the reworked timeline, I have A TON of stuff to cover - everything ranging from Lúcio's revolution against Vishkar, to the Bastion comic, to more Crisis flashbacks, to the beginning of Overwatch, etc. It's gonna be dense, and I'm estimating it will be another 30-ish chapters, like "Old Habits."

Once again, thank you all so much for reading along! I hope you're as excited to read the sequel as I am to write it.

See you all in two weeks!

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[Sept. 29]: The young heir to a yakuza empire learns to deal with impatience and strict fathers...and meets some interesting people called "Death Agents."

(Do you fear the Reaper?)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!