spare parts

by kpkndy

Summary

It takes a village to raise a child.

Notes

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hastily unbeta'd. lovingly vomited up.

(dirty enablers on this server are partially responsible: https://discord.gg/tgdP5U)

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There are parts you keep. Parts you change, or cover up, or throw away.

That’s foundational in undercover.

And yet, when the kid cocks his head in this sly, sharp sort of way and says, “What’s your deal, anyway?” Gabriel can’t help but want to be honest.

He’s wiser than that, of course. He’s here for a reason: the small, orange bottles that are scattered around the kid on the bed as he takes inventory. There must be enough ‘ludes on that bed to incapacitate all of Rhode Island, straight out of a purloined shipping container, courtesy of Deadlock.

Gabe forgets to reply, momentarily. He’s thinking of something else. “What?”

The kid on the bed shifts. He’s only in his underwear, and some loose, plaid shirt. Not that Gabe had anything to do with that --this is the kid’s private space, after all. A single room in a motel, where Gabe sits uneasily.

“S’normally an introduction before I start dispensin’.” The kid smiles as he straightens out his legs. There are marks on them, just as dark as the ones on his face. Bruises, largely. There’s one high on the inside of the kid’s thigh that might be a tooth-mark. The thought is distantly horrifying. “So, what’s your deal?”

Gabe’s eyes move from the bite mark to the kid’s eyes. They look remarkably at ease, like the rest of him, until Gabe looks closer. “No deal.” He says, trying to sound gentle. “Just looking to get by.”

“Get by, huh?” With some sort of practised ease, the kid twists to reach an orange bottle behind him. There’s such rehearsal in the moment. It’s difficult to watch.

Maybe that’s why Gabe’s eyes are drawn to the small slice of sky that peeks through the gap in the curtains. It’s dark outside, a clear, indigo sky interrupted by flashes of neon on the motel sign. That’s as dilapidated as the rest of the place it. Only five letters buzz; ‘no vac’.

“What’chu after?” The kid asks, easily. “M? Lucy--

“Ludes.” Gabe says, easily, still looking out of the window. He doesn’t mention anything else --not how they’ll end up in some blackwatch lab being analysed for their purity. Not how he probably knows more about the origin of the pills than the kid does. Not his fault either: Deadlock are smart enough to keep the boys they sell largely ignorant to the cause. “How’d you run this?”

He looks back at the kid, then, who is opening a new bottle of pills to peer inside. Worse --somehow, when he uses a practised, steady hand to tip three or so out into his hand and swallow them without any difficulty at all. “We’ll go three a pill.” The kid says. He’s still looking into the orange bottle.

Gabe knows the game. He’s been ghosting Deadlock for long enough. Reaching into his jacket, he pulls out his a few notes. No wallet, just cash. As anonymous as possible. “Hundred for the bottle fair?”

Turning back towards the kid, he holds the notes but doesn’t extend them. There’s a hesitation. He
doesn’t want to think of why. He’s only here to do a job.

The kid’s eyes flick from the money to Gabe’s face and then back again. He looks — Jesus, almost frightened. Not just in his eyes, but in the way his hands shake, just a little, when he leans up. Smart enough to take the money first before he offers the bottle.

Gabe takes it. Tries to be careful in the gesture, so as not to startle the kid any worse. He steps back to put it into his jacket pocket. To put some air between them.

It seems to do the kid some good. “Thought you might jus’ take ‘em.” He exhales. Gabe reads it as a gesture of relief until the kid shuffles to the edge of the bed, planting his toes on the cheap carpet before parting his thighs. He leans back on his hands. “‘Less it’s somethin’ else y’want.”

All Gabe can see is the angry bite mark on the kid’s thigh. He isn’t appealed in the least. “No.” He says, plainly — almost harshly, really. He turns away and lights himself a cigarette.

It’s something to do. A way to avoid the look that seems to come over the kid immediately afterwards as his legs close gingerly. That seems to quiet him down while Gabe smokes away, looking out of the window again, noting the neon, and the smell of tobacco and sarsaparilla and the faint sweetness of an omega.

It’s the first nice sort of silence he’d has since he’d been in this room. It doesn’t even last long.

“You got a name?” The kid asks, eventually, starting to sort the bottles back into the drawer by his bed.

The question catches Gabe’s attention, and when he turns and sees the kid look so curious and earnest and genuine, he forget, for a second, that there are parts you’re supposed to change, or cover, or hide entirely.

“Gabriel.” He says, softly, without really thinking.

It earns him a smile, at least.

“Gabriel, huh?” The kid muses, having at last cleared the sheets of pill bottles. “Like the angel?”

Gabe shrugs.

“I reckon I’m a student a’ names.” The kid continues. He looks like he’s gotten a bit more confidence back. It suits his features. “Never met a Gabriel before, though.” He fiddles with his hands, briefly, before leaning across to his nightstand to take a cigarette of his own. “Y’got a nice face, y’know. Figures a good-looking guy like wouldn’t need a shakedown t’get some.”

Gabe takes the cigarettes out of his mouth. He doesn’t turn back towards the kid.

“Least, not if that mark’s anythin’ t’go by.”

Gabe’s hand comes up to his neck. It’s faded, and obscured by his collar, but here, nonetheless. It’s hard to see, he knows, unless you’re looking for it. It turns his stomach to realise that the kid is probably in the habit of looking for mating marks.

“No need t’be so shy.” The kid says, easily. “Get all sorts ‘round here. An’ -an’ I’m real good with
discretion, too, s--"

“It ain’t like that.” Gabe cuts him off, frustratedly. Jack occurs to him, briefly. He doesn’t feel any different for the thought.

The kid makes a noise like he understands. Turns so he’s laying on his stomach as his feet swing absently above him. “What’s it like, then?”

Gabe fights a smile. The kid certainly knows his business. It feels easy enough to want to keep talking. The delivery of each question is so innocuous, but clever enough to stay relevant. Gabe knows the game because he’s the one that normally runs it. Not here, though. This wasn’t supposed to be important. Just a means to an end.

“How old are you, anyway, kid?” He asks, then, changing up his tact enough that the kid’s movements become less carefree.

Then, up on his elbows, he’s frowning. “Seems like a strange question not to lead with if you got a problem with it.” The kid says, haughtily, before he lets out this mean, derisive little smile. “People always wanna start moralisin’ after things are done, an’ not before. Real convenient.”

It’s at least a truth. One a kid like that oughtn’t to know yet, either. Smarter than he looks.

“I got no problem with it.” Gabe says, easily, taking another drag from his cigarette. “Just curious, that’s all.”

Another silence extends between them. Not a natural lull in the conversation --if you could call it that. The kid just lays there for a few seconds like he’s considering. And then, when he comes to some kind of unspoken conclusion, he pipes up again. “Eighteen.” He says. “An’ you?”

There it is again. If Gabe didn’t know any better, he’d already have suspicions about this kid. Deadlock are doing well to have somebody like that --a distributor who can get cosy with clients. Morals seems a small price to say by way of it.

He puts out his own cigarette. The thought has made him lose the taste for it. “North of you.”

The kid huffs out a laugh at that. “No kiddin’. ” He looks Gabe up and down and says, “You takin’ or what?” He’s talking about the pills.

“Not here.” Gabe says. He can feel the kid looking at him. He isn’t sure how to articulate what it’s like --or even if it’s good or bad. Maybe it’s best he leave.

Putting out the half-finished cigarette in the ashtray on the nightstand, he walks himself over to the door wordlessly. Seems pointless in saying anything. Awkward, almost. So he keeps himself quiet and reaches for the doorknob and hears the kid speak. It halts him, a little.

“If those don’t last ya,” The kid says, looking up at him easily. “I’ll have more ‘ludes by next week.” He sits himself up on the bed a little. “Ask for me at the ‘high side’. Tell ‘em Jesse sent ya.”

Gabe feels the pill bottle as it rests against his chest. They’ll be handed into forensic the moment he’s back on base. They won’t last at all.

“Sure.” He says, awkwardly, still staring at the back of the door. From the bed, the kid --no, Jesse:
Jesse makes some small noise of contentment.

“See y’around, Gabriel.” He says. Says it so casually and intimate --like it’s something secret. It lands in the space between the pill bottle and Gabe’s lungs.

He leaves wishing he’d used any other name.

Gabe catches some sleep on the transport back to base.

He dreams of straw dogs. He wakes as they land.

Still feeling restless, he ignores the need to take the pills to forensic. Ignores the need for a shower, or for breakfast, early, still-dark daybreak as it now is.

Something is still itchy under his skin. Under his neck, where the faint mating mark is, and whatever’s caused it is strong enough to lead to him walking down the winding corridors on the Overwatch side of base, where the pain is fresher and the light are brighter. Where, amazingly, there are only a few others awake and milling about at this time.

He gets the doorcode wrong on the first try. Uses the old one. It’s been long enough since he’s been to Jack’s quarters that he barely remembers being notified of the change.

Still, it doesn’t take him long to get inside, and then he’s taking off his shoes in the blessed dark.

The room itself is airy, and sort of cold. Just how Jack likes it. If they were in Gabriel’s room right now, it’d be warm as an oven. For once, it’s a blessing. The New Mexico heat clings to him and makes him feel vaguely feverish. The cold is grounding: centering. Like a familiar winter. Jack’s scent is even more welcome. Something he’d forgotten to miss.

There’s a blue holoslide active above the bed, at the back of the room, and Gabe thinks for a moment that Jack is still up, working or researching or doing god-knows-what until he comes closer. It’s by the blue light of the holoslide that he finds Jack asleep. Still propped up into sitting. The shut of his eyes obscured by the way the light reflects on his reading glasses.

It isn’t clear how long he’s been like that. Or how long it’s been since they’ve seen eachother.

Long enough, Gabe thinks, that his foremost emotion is gladness to see his mate as he turns off the slide, and slips under the sheets next to Jack’s body. It’s almost preferable to find him asleep: nothing can be said. They can be close like this without any implications --any ugly questions about incidents and accidents.

Gabe believes in leaving Blackwatch at the door. Believes in them being intimate without pretense. It’s easier when Jack is silent and soft and receptive: unable to complain about Gabe’s protectiveness or condescension as he winds his arms around Jack and breathes in his smell.


He must fall asleep like that, all in his clothes, half-under the covers and anchored around Jack, because the next thing he knows, there’s a faint light behind him illuminating the room in a milky, orange light.
The next thing he know, his arms are empty, and his mouth is as dry as the desert wind he’s been walking in earlier --arid and nasty. Blinking, momentarily confused, he looks about the room to get his bearings. Morning must just be breaking. The holoclock numbers that suspend over the nightstand say about as much. From the ensuite, he can see the light is on, and hear the sound of running water.

Gabe doesn’t get up immediately. It’s almost enough, for a moment, to content himself with the smell of the sheets and the feel of them. Almost. But he likes looking for trouble too much, and rises, heading towards the light of the bathroom, where the smell of home is stronger.

Jack is inside, washing shaving foam from his face. He startles only momentarily to see Gabe appear behind him. It’s half-a-second, maybe less, but a look passes over his eyes that Gabe sees too often these days and can’t quite account for. It’s on him as he takes the glass by the sink and fills it with cold water. His mouth is still dry as all hell.

As he drinks, Jack murmurs, “Couldn’t find your own quarters last night?”

Isn’t Jack sharp today? He must not have slept well. “Must have got confused when I saw the door marked ‘Strike Commander’, sweetheart.” He replies, just as easily, wetting his lips with tapwater. Maybe Jack is still angry at him for something. It’s almost impossible to recall, now.

And, of course, Jack isn’t going to just tell him because that would be far too straightforward. No, instead, his voice is like the steam, etching into the corners of the mirror --obscure, somehow, as he says, “How was New Mexico?”

A warning sign, surely. Jack never pretends to be that curious about the affairs of Blackwatch: affairs he’d otherwise condemn.

Gabe’s silence turns out to be wise when Jack goes on. “You left in enough of a hurry.”

The sound of the water dies as Jack turns the tap. The movement is sharp and harsh. His face looks a little hard in the mirror.

Gabe looks at his back, broad, marred by a few marks, but familiar. Sees the faint circle of his own teeth on Jack’s neck, now so faded he can barely see it. It’s only then he really remembers why he’d left so suddenly. How he’d packed in his room and slipped away quietly. He couldn’t face Jack, then. Couldn’t face another disappointment.

It’s like this every time.

The thought stays in the air between them. Ugly but unspoken. No words occur to Gabriel. No justifications. So he just perches on the edge of the bathtub and watches Jack as he dries his face. How Jack looks over the volume of his own face, and then runs it and through his hair with some enhanced concentration, skimming the blonde that’s slowly being overtaken by white.

The pale flag of age is advancing. It’s overdue --but clearly, it isn’t something Jack is happy about. His eyes, now sad, move from his own form in the mirror to Gabriel, behind him. His voice is a strange sort of way when he says, “What are you thinking, when you look at me like that?”

*We’re getting older, aren’t we?* Gabe thinks.
Gabe’s eyes drop to the tapwater in his hand. Another discussion he doesn’t want to have.

Cooly: detached, he shrugs. “I wasn’t conscious of looking at you.”

Isn’t not good enough. Jack is clearly still hurt. It’s as if he’s looking to pick a fight when he turns, fully to Gabriel, and says. “Well, I was.” He says, plainly. “What were you thinking of?”

What is this never happens for us?

Gabe shrugs again. He tries to seem as removed as possible. “I don’t remember thinking of anything in particular.” He says, blandly. Then, as if to cut the confrontation short, he asks, “Something on your mind, Jack?”

It’s a dare. To bring it up --to demand an apology for Gabe’s sudden exit, and his return, like this, without remorse or explanation. If Jack wants to be cryptic about it, by all means. They can both like that.

Jack sees it for what it is. Looks like he might rise to it, too. There’s fresh, real hurt in his eyes, and it looks like it’s going to slip out.

But then he says, “You woke me, in the night.” His expression becomes cold. Wiser to the game. To the argument they’ve been having over and over and over again for years. Coldly, he says, “Next time, knock like everybody else.”

And that really is the least of it.

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Of course, it isn’t.

Down in forensic, where Gabriel can’t well make a getaway, he’s purloined by Ana, who is by no stretch pleased to see him.

“I didn’t suppose you’d alert the rest of us that you were back.” She opens with. Her face is hard lines and accusation. Shouldn’t be surprised she’s taking Jack’s side, really. “Half us barely knew you were gone.”

“I had work to do.” Gabe says, evasively. He looks over at one of the staff. They can’t analyse any faster, he knows.

“Work, indeed.” Ana says, through her teeth “Running away is more like it.”

This isn’t her business. He doesn’t say that, though --knows it will only make things worse. But if they’re going to talk about: if he really has no choice, he’d rather it not be in front of the small and certainly curious audience of lab assistants.

“Working.” Gabe says, again, blandly. “Don’t you have some work you should be getting on with, right now?”

It’s probably unwise to try to pull rank on her, even implicitly. Makers her eyes grow cold in that way he sometimes sees when she’s sizing up a target from a distance. Always has been an efficient shot under Jack’s leadership.
“Some mate you are.” She clicks her tongue derisively. “As a matter of fact, I do.” Her arms fold. “But I thought you might want to know how much damage you did.”

She says it like he doesn’t know.

Like he hasn’t been there to witness it. It happens every time. Every time. He knows, too intimately, the way Angela shakes her head when she says it --not quite meeting Jack’s eyes. The first few times it would get to him there. These days Jack makes it to privacy before the disappointment gets the better of him.

He goes in circles like that; empty, miserable. Wondering what he should have done differently. What could be his fault.

Nothing is, of course.

The SEP had it’s own quirks. The realistic parts of Gabe know that. Know that for every bit of excitement and hope, for all the careful planning and wishfulness, it’s probably never going to happen. Jack isn’t going to get pregnant. Their lives are going to stay the same.

The probably is the worst part --the sinister, traitorous glimmer of hope that Jack is always so quick to cling to. The one that breaks his heart quietly under Angela’s sight.

Of course Gabe left.

He’d do anything not to have to face that room again, and that news.

“Invaluable as ever.” Gabe murmurs, distantly. “Run along.”

She doesn’t usually bother with this, and the apathy in her expression suggests she’s giving up, which is only ever a good sign. Apathy isn’t enough, though. Ana always has to get the last word.

Gabe anticipates that much when she brushes past him, the slightly collision purposeful and deliberate as she parts with, “You’re a coward.”

The words hang there in the air. Gabe lets them be.

He thinks it’s probably true, anyway.

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The quaaludes are Japanese.

Too pure to be made out of the backwater gorge Gabe found them in.

So, like a good soldier, he’s boots on the ground in New Mexico less than five hours later, through the dusty mesa and back to the cheap motel he was in the night before. Even in the sunset, the broken neon flickers feel harsh and painful. Still ‘no vac’.

There are few folks around. The place is more like some memory than an actual place. The signs of life are so scarce. Gabe has to wonder if it’s real, as he looks over his shoulder, to see the yolky sun giant balancing on some distant, red rock. The last place he would have ever put Deadlock was in
some wasteland like this.

On the way to the kid’s room --presumably, anyway, he passes another man who’s doing up his belt. Their shoulders collide. Gabe turns to watch him go, staggering, not drunk --maybe high, with the scent of a rut coming off of him in waves. He doesn’t like to think about the other details.

The kid’s door is open a little.

Out of pity, or courtesy, or something, Gabe knocks, anyway.

From the other side, he hears a hoarse voice cough out, “You forget somethin’?”

Gabe doesn’t really know what to say. So, in place of saying anything, he pushes the door to, and peers inside.

There’s not much left to the imagination. Not with the kid lying, naked, on his side, his feet all tangled in the bed sheets. There are stains on the mattress: fresh ones, too. Some notes are on the nightstand, but it can only be thirty dollars or so. Gabe has more than that in his back pocket. The thought makes him uneasy.

When Jesse spots him, he rolls onto his back with a little difficulty and props himself up. The vacancy in his eyes turns to something brighter. “Back so soon, huh?” He sounds pleased about it. It’s hard to say how deep or genuine that emotion is. “I thought you was Johnny Ringo for a second there.”

With some great difficulty, Jesse pulls himself to the side of the bed and gets up. His walk is pained when he goes over to the dresser to take the money, and light himself a cigarette. Gabe stays in the door, careful to watch the flick of the lighter, purposefully not looking at the smear of blood on the inside of the kid’s thighs.

“Johnny Ringo seems pretty rough to me.” He says, before he can really help it, coming inside a little. Jesse staggers back to the beg with a shrug, sitting himself down carefully.

“Round here, that’s just how it is.” Jesse says, carelessly. A smile occurs to him as he says, “They’re either rough or whiskey-limp.” He scratches his neck. Seems utterly comfortable under Gabe’s gaze, nude as he still is. Maybe this is business for the kid. Gabe doesn’t really know where to look.

“What are you?”

Gabe bites the inside of his cheek. “Should I come back later?”

“Don’t be like that.” The kid laughs at that --genuine and sort of corrupted, waving a hand as he pulls the sheets over himself a bit better. He’s a slight thing, and it’s accentuated when he takes another cigarette off of his nightstand and extends his arm towards Gabe. “Cigarette?”

There’s some evidence of muscle, and his shoulders and hips are wide enough that he might grow into something someday. Left out here, though, Gabe doubts it. Doubts the kid would look so thin if he were anywhere else.

“No, thanks.” Gabe says, quietly. “I got my own.”

“Suit yerself.” The kid says. Shrugs his shoulders and draws his feet in so he’s sitting cross-legged. “What brings you back here, anyway, Gabriel?” He uses the name again with obvious pleasure.
“An’ don’t tell me it’s because you’re out of pills. If you took th’ whole bottle yourself you’d be
doin’ the breaststroke face-down in the Hudson by now.”

That much is true. Three or four would have done in anybody else. Gabe wagers he might need a
few more but the kid is right nonetheless.

“I liked what you sold me.” He says, carefully. “Wanted to see what else you had.”

The kid’s face falls slightly. As if he was genuinely expecting Gabe to climb onto the mattress pad
and ask for something else. Like he’s the same as Johnny Ringo or whoever --walking in here and
twisting the kid’s arms good. “Oh.” He murmurs, with a sigh, stuffing the cigarette in his mouth as
he opens his top drawer. “What you after?”


The kid rummages. The vertebrate s on his back are visible. There are fresh new marks. Lots of
shining dots that must be cigarette burns. “You want pain stuff, or--”

“Dopey stuff.”

After a few moments of silence, the kid produces another orange pill bottle, rattling it for good effect.
“Benzos any good for you?”

Gabe nods. “Sure.” He says.

He’d put money on the Benzos being japanese, too. The Shimada-gumi run the market on downers
and the like. Los Muertos are much more notorious for the in-betweens. Maybe that’s why they all
appear as if they think they’re invincible.

As he thinks, the kid tips a couple of the pills out into his hand and looks down at them. They’re
bright blue. Gabe does his very best not to think of Jack.

“These are a personal favourite, y’know.” Jesse says, tipping the pills back into the bottle and closing
it up. “How many you after?”

“What’s the rate?”

“What’s it matter?” Jesse huffs out an airy laugh. “Guy like you, nice clothes. Sober.” He leans back
on his hands and smirks like he’s proud of something. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you was a
cop. Or married.”

Married. That makes Gabe laugh. There are no rings or documents, but he might as well be. “A
cop?” he asks, derisively.

“Yeah.” Jesse nods. “Thought you might bus’ me the other night.” He looks at Gabe very intensely
for a few second, still smiling. “Law don’t usually go around here, but there’s --there’s somethin’
strange about you.” He tilts his head, and laughs almost nervously. “Like you might be dangerous.”

Gabe doesn’t know what to say. The kid is smarter than he should be. Smarter than he looks.

Evasively, he raises an eyebrow. “More dangerous than Johnny Ringo?”
Jesse laughs. Shakes his head and goes back to counting pills. “Different sort.” He says. “That’s the kind I can handle.” That’s said with such confidence, too. Like the kid is proud of this misery. Of ‘handling’ men like that --an alpha from what Gabe had gathered from their brief encounter in the hall, who’s marks are still seen on the fresh bloodstains of the mattress of the dark marks on the kid’s wrists where he was likely held down.

Jesse doesn’t handle men like that. He survives them.

Gabe doesn’t know how to feel about it.

“The benzos.” He says, coughing a little. “How much?”

Still smiling, faintly, Jesse crushes his cigarette out in the ashtray on his nightstand. “Hundred an’ twenty.” He says. “They’re strong.”

Gabe reaches into his back pocket. Takes out some notes, and maybe a little extra. He does it before he really examines the action. He doesn’t want it to seem like pity. Jesse takes the money first, just like last time, almost snatching, before he offers the bottle up.

“How much?” The kid says, unfolding the notes. “I had plenty a’ good times on--...” He grows quiet after he finishes counting. “Think you mighta’ miscounted here.” Jesse says, without looking up.

Gabe swallows. “Johnny Ringo forgot his tip.” He says, resolutely. “That’s all.”

He expects that should make the kid happy. Or --or at least hopes it does. The fact that the kid earns more for the pills is so upsetting. Jesus, maybe he doesn’t. Maybe Deadlock take a nice, hefty cut.

What he doesn’t expect is for the kid to throw the extra firsty dollar back at him, angrily. “I look like I need your pity?” Jesse asks him, shortly.

“No,” Gabe says. “I guess not.”

That doesn’t appease the kid any. “Jesus,” He hisses, “Y’think thirty bucks is gonna turn my life around anyhow? That it’s gonna make any difference in the long run?” He puts the money in the drawer angrily and slams it shut. “No, you guys jus’ do it so you can feel real good about yourselves.” The kid huffs through his nose. “Some saint you are.”

Gabe’s face feels a little hot. He turns the pill bottle over in his hand and sighs. “I didn’t mean it like that.” He says.

“Sure y’ didn’t.” The kid sneers. He sighs and lights another cigarette. “Y’know, if y’wanna leave a thirty dollar tip, there’s plenty that can get you.” His legs part a little, like the other night, but this time with the drying blood over the fading bite mark, it’s somehow worse to witness.

Gabe looks the kid up and down. Sad, skinny thing. Marked but pretty. Nice hips. A pride to the way he carries himself, despite it all.

“We’re not doing that.” he says.

The kid’s legs close again. He shrugs, carefree. “Right. ‘Cause you’re married.”

It’s almost infuriating. The sunset is bleeding into evening and the mating mark on Gabe’s neck
would have been even harder to spot the other night. He doesn’t smell like Jack. Bears no jewellery or visible sentiment. The kid must just be sharp.

“Not married.” Gabe says, a little sadly. He really doesn’t want to think about Jack right now. Or the apology he’s going to have to formulate. “Not me.”

The kid doesn’t seem to buy it all that much. “Well, whatever y’got goin’ on that’s got you tiptoin’ around me.” He gestures with the cigarette animatedly, and it’s sort of mesmerising.

“Maybe you’re not my type.” Gabe says.

Jesse laughs at that. “Please.” He shakes his head. “Ain’t not a one of us believes that.”

And he’s right, too. Perceptive little bastard. Got the world pegged at this point, if Gabe is not mistaken. It’s precocious and uncomfortable enough for Gabe to bru down his thighs, and stand.

“I should be going.” He says. He gets to the door before he hears the kid speak again.

“I’d screw you for free, y’know.” Jesse grins. “Happen to like dangerous men.” Gabe doesn’t say anything, nor want to. At this point, he knows the kid will twist his words or just interpret them, and he doesn’t know which is worse at this point. “If you’re after somethin’ different, I’ll be at the ‘high side’, on wednesday, like I said before.”

Gabe exhales. “What’s the occasion?” He asks, even if he knows he’ll regret it.


Gabe doesn’t say anything else. God, he can’t think to. He walks himself out of the room and down the hall and back out into the dusty mesa, where the sky is fading into a dark blue. Outside, the man he recognises from before is smoking a cigarette. He notes Gabe, and walks back inside the building.

Gabe starts walking back into town.

On the way, he takes a pill.
It must be around five in the morning when Jack wakes.

Not suddenly from a dream, or peaceful out of feeling rested, but from the faint buzz of the error code on his door panel. A warning that somebody is trying to get in.

Gabriel.

Jack doesn’t bother moving when he hears it. He turns onto his side in the sheets and closes his eyes again. He has to get out of bed in an hour and a half, anyway, but he commits himself to the suggestion of getting back to sleep, if only to spite the man on the other side of the door.

God, even the thought makes him angry. A few days ago, he might have been heartbroken. Now, though? Jack’s through with it. His eyes close and he tries to think of something else. Mechanically, he starts counting backwards from three-hundred.

At two-hundred and eighty-three, the error code stops. Given up, so soon? Good, Jack thinks, smiling in the dark. Gabriel had a lot of nerve to come to his bed the night before --had Jack been more cognizant he might have given his mate a piece of his mind, or worse.

(But he hadn’t. He woke, overheating and uncomfortable, after Gabe had been there for some time. Maybe it had just been the sudden and welcome scent of his alpha. Or maybe he still was hurt -- somewhere. But in those few seconds, in the dark, without Gabe to say or do anything worse, it had been--...well, jesus, Jack had let him stay, hadn’t he?

Sentimental heart that he is.)

Jack loses count. Not just because of the thought, but because of the abrupt and loud knock at his door.

Jesus Christ. He’d said to knock.

He should have said not to come at all.

The last thing in the world he wants right now it to face Gabe. But the world has never very much been concerned with his desires one way or the other.

It’s only after a good few minutes of incessant knocking that he does get out of bed, though. Jack still has his pride, somehow, even if he has precious little else. Without calling for the lights, he slips on a shirt and crosses the room he knows well. He goes over to the door. Hesitates, by it, if only for a
second, staring at the back of it and bracing himself.

There’s so much he wants to say to Gabe, but now isn’t the time. So his hand moves for the panel, and he unlocks the door.

The hall light is white-hot and intense. Jack squints.

He can make out Gabe. Gabe smiling, dopily, back at him.

“’I was sleeping, ” Jack says, in a tight voice.

“’Hmm.” Gabe’s bleary eyes fix on him in that permanent and strange smile. His scent is strange. There’s something the matter. “You’re awake now.”

Heavy with fatigue, Jack isn’t so sure he can keep his vitriol in forever. “Is there something you want?” He hisses, shortly.

Gabe takes a heavy step forward, so that he has a foot in the room. He leans in and goes right for Jack’s neck in this sloppy, pathetic sort of display of affection. None of the hurt from before has left it. It comes up instinctively, shoving Gabe backwards with sudden and unexpected force. “What are you doing?”

There really is something wrong if Gabe isn’t taking the hint. If he’s dropping his head and looking to Jack with enhanced, singular peculiarity. “Missed you.” He murmurs. “Thought we --thought we could--” He comes forward again.

Jack holds him at arms length, angrily. “Thought we could, what?!”

But Gabe isn’t having it. He staggers forward again, all friendly, like they’ve been apart for some great length of time. Like he didn’t put whatever distance between them there, all because Jack isn’t --because he couldn’t---

“You’re not still angry, are you?” Gabe whispers. He sounds like he’s been drinking, but all Jack can smell on his externally is cigarettes. Something has shifted, though --something in his system that has him going towards Jack again.

He takes Gabe’s wrist and twists cruelly. It works --Gabe breaks the lock to pull away even if it takes him a few seconds longer than it should, and frankly, Jack is grateful for the distance. “Of course I’m still fucking angry! You just --just left--...” He catches the way Gabe looks in the light. Pieces it together. “Are you on something right now?”

Gabe shrugs.”I jus’ took something for a headache.” He mumbles. “Just something small.”

“You can’t be serious.” Jack hisses, louder this time. Not from anger --but pain.

Short wonder about where whatever he’s taken is from; Gabe left him here without so much as a word to get fucked up in the desert with a bunch of bandits and whores, and now he’s come crawling back to Jack’s sheets.

Worthless mate. Cold-footed swine.

“Get out of my fucking sight.” He says. Murmurs it --too struck by how much Gabe’s presence is
getting under his skin and twisting. He turns to go back inside. Gabe, foolish man, tries to follow him.

“No --don’t--” He lunges after Jack as the door closes, stopping it short a few inches with the toe of his boot. Fingers worm their way in, trying to tug the door open. “C’mon, Jack. Don’t be like this.”

Those doors are blastproof. No man --no matter what his designation or how enhanced he might be, could pull it open. Let alone while under the influence. He tries, though, growing more and more frustrated until he’s just thumping it at wildly, growling out all the while. “Jack, come on.”

And for some ungodly reason, Jack lingers there, in the dark. He leans against the inside of the door and closes his eyes. Tries to imagine how things would be if Gabriel had just --just stayed. Even if he knew it was bad news, or no news. It isn’t fair for Gabe to be so fairweather --to be there for every sudden and irregular heat, and then when it’s over, talk quietly and excitedly about if it happens, only to disappear when it doesn’t.

That’s too much misery for a single person to bear. Even for somebody like Jack.

So he doesn’t linger long. Still hurt --still fresh from the injury of it, he pulls away from the door, and crosses the room back to his bed. He ignores Gabe’s distant calls. The sound of his voice when he says Jack’s name. The way his scent permeates, still, calling of home in a strange and unfamiliar way.

He lies there with his eyes open for a long time. Gabe must fall asleep before he goes, or maybe he just leaves.

Either way it happens --it’s only when silence descends that Jack can even shut his eyes.

Then he sleeps. He does not dream.

- 

Gabe wakes suddenly --from water to the face.

Above him, Jack is holding an empty glass, looking sharp and unfriendly. Like Gabe could cut his hands on the other man’s edges.

He’s too shocked to really speak at first, blinking water out of his eyes, shivering at the onslaught as he tries to figure out where he is.

A hallway, of all places. He must have passed out on Jack’s doorstep.

“You’re up.” Jack says, tiredly. That’s all that needs be said, but he remains.

Gabe wipes his face again. “Yeah.” He grumbles. “Thanks for that.”

His brain aches. Feels devoid of happiness, somehow, like it was drained last night. He never has much fun on benzos. Would have preferred to ‘ludes, but they were already in the lab last night, and he couldn’t think of a good enough excuse at the time. Taking a handful of the dopey stuff wasn’t his brightest move.

He clambers up to his feet with the help of the doorframe. Jack is already inside by then, going over
to his wardrobe to dress for the day. Sickly and awkward, Gabe has no other recourse but to follow
him, their paths only diverging so Gabe can sit down on the bed. It still smells like Jack.

Guilt occurs to him distantly. For some reason, he thinks of Jesse.

“Still angry at me?” He ventures, in a small voice.

Jack huffs. He takes a shift off it’s hanger and casts the hanger onto the floor --which is
uncharacteristic for one so usually fastidious. He pulls a sleeve over his arm and clicks his tongue. A
habit picked up from Ana. “What do you think?” He mutters, bitterly.

That’s Jack, alright. Shows up wounded to pick a fight.

At that, Gabe just lies himself down on the bed. Abandons sitting altogether as he sighs. “Jesus
Christ, Jack.” He murmurs. “How many times d’you want me to say I’m sorry?”

Mistake. That only makes it worse. Jack whirs on him. “Why don’t we start with just once ?” He
snaps. “D’you have any idea what --what it was --...” The shout in his voice dies off pretty quickly,
for once, and then Jack’s voice is thin in substance as air as he trails off, a hand coming up to cover
his eyes. “If you think this is my fault, than you could at least--”

“What?” Gabe sits back up for that. Attentive to the pain in Jack’s voice. Present for it, even when he
knows it can’t be remedied. Can’t end well. “I never --never once said I think this is your fault--”

Jack throws a jacket down on the bed hard. “You didn’t have to.” He grinds out, angrily. His
expression doesn’t wane, or dissolve to tears. Gabe doesn’t know if that’s better or worse. “You
think I don’t know exactly what you’re thinking when you look at me?”

It’s hopeless, isn’t it? There would be no point in trying to explain what he was doing down in New
Mexico. No point in trying to protest now. So Gabe detaches from it. Leans back an elbow and feels
over some smooth patch of sheet. “What am I thinking when I look at you, Jack?”

So Jack look at him. Dares Gabe to look back at him with any expression so he can bend it to his
prejudices, right now. The silence is worse. Gabe should never have left.

But he’s not going to say it just because it’s what Jack wants to hear. He’s not going to apologise for
the fact that they process this pain differently.

Eventually, Jack looks at him again, witheringly “Answer the question.”

“No.” He says, dismissively, and when Jack opens his mouth to protest, he cuts again. “What? Is
there any answer I can give you that you’re not going to take personally?”

Jack scowls. “It is personal--”

“No!” Gabe cries out. “No, it isn’t!” His mouth opens and shuts once or twice as he formulates the
words. “You’re just hurt, and --and you’re looking for some place to put--”

It’s worse than the silence. The worst, in fact, because then Jack is advancing on him like a bullet
from a gun. Standing over Gabe, poised like he wants to draw blood.

“That’s what you think this is?” He asks. Quietly, though. His voice is small and moves dangerously
like fire, as sharp and essential as the blade of a knife.

That isn’t what Gabe thinks. At least, not all of it. It’s nobody’s fault: it just means that Jack goes from bearing it all to putting it on Gabe the moment he has another reason to be angry. Too late to explain that, now, though.

Jack is still looking at him like he might do something terrible.

So Gabe speaks.

“I shouldn’t have left.” He says, very lowly. His tone isn’t remorseful. But it’s authentic. “I shouldn’t have done that.” He looks up at Jack, unguarded, his face grim and neutral. It makes Jack look away. Those blue eyes worm to some bleak corner of the room as if to escape the weight of it.


“No, you’re not.” Jack turns. Puts an arm through his shirt, like he’s suddenly so through with it. “Get out of my room.”

Jack won’t listen to him, right now. He still needs time to get over it. Hell, maybe Gabe does, too. It’s difficult to say what he feels. Never clear-cut: instead, some mix of vitriol and disappointment and longing.

He leaves the room thinking about how they used to be good together. Doesn’t say anything else.

Seems whenever anything is said, it serves only to bring out the bad in each other.

- 

The benzos turn out to be Japanese, too. Plans start to come together.

Gabe spends the weekend on-base, talking over holomaps and marking train routes he wants monitored, or supply lines he wants infiltrated, and locations he wants surveilled. They’re going to put Deadlock under the microscope. Going to gut the whole organisation, slowly and silently, from the outside.

They can trace the same batch of pills to a distribution line that runs on an old cattle trail. Easy enough to take from there, put in some undercover agents. A sting operation will do nicely.

Deadlock has been a thorn in the side for too long. The gun-running has caused all sorts of problems all over. Military-grade tech turning up in the hands of domestic terrorists and the like. Emptying out that backwater little gorge is going to see Gabe sleeping easier for a good long while. Booking some of those colourful names he’s heard so much about is going to be even more vindicating.

Prison’s too good for some of them, he knows. There’s a list of a couple of characters he can recall that he thinks he’d like to pay a visit to before the sentencing. People he’s been watching for years. People he’d like to give a more personal treatment too.

And for some reason, of that list, Johnny Ringo’s name sits at the top.
The ‘high side’ is exactly what Gabe had expected it to be.

Some spit-and penny saloon by the side of road. It’s a sorry sort of joint: cracked wood, peeling paint, the sign hanging askew. Broken glass glistens in the red rock of the ground outside. Men sit in chairs missing legs, talking quietly, smoking cigarettes. Staring quietly at Gabriel as he crosses the threshold into the bar.

Inside is just as typical. Darts cut through the air to his left. The crack of the cue on pool balls and the clink of glasses make him feel more aware of every solid part of his body. The air is smoky and only parts of it are tobacco. Patrons are largely quiet, despite the edge of tension to it all. The air is static with some kind of latent electricity --the musk of a rut strong enough that it feels like a small enough spark might combust the room.

Gabe’s disciplined enough not to pay it much mind. He knows this scene before. Isn’t his first time in a place like this.

The bar is being tended by some haggard-looking beta with a shoulder holster. The glint of his gun is visible. He looks at Gabe impatiently, so he tries to be brief.

“Looking for Jesse.” He says, in a plain voice. The beta rolls his eyes.

“Upstairs.”

So that’s where Gabe goes. He finds it without fuss, too, up some creaky set of backroom stairs where the last of the evening sun is bleeding through in a narrow window. Halfway up, it occurs to him --and jesus, gabe has to stop walking to fully process it. That smell --he recognises it as Jesse, but there’s some more to it. Deep and incontestably enticing.

Despite it all, he feels some primal tug: something deep in the marrow of his bones. Something he associates deeply with Jack (and yet, it feels no less strong or intimate without him here).

He ascends the stairs in a sort of daze, wandering further up the creaky floor, drawn in by how much stronger the scent becomes. Jesus. Suddenly the scene downstairs makes so much more sense to Gabe. Even here, out in the hall, he feels like the stitching on the outside of him is coming loose. That he’s unravelling.

Further up in the hall, he can hear muffled sounds of life. The sound of sharp breaths and grunts. It’s hard to say if Jesse’s the one making noise. There’s only one way to find out.

God, what is he doing, standing out in this hall, half-hard, his breath suddenly hotter and faster? What did he come here for, if he knew this is how he’d find Jesse?

Curiosity, he tells himself. Pity.

(And he tries to think no further on it.)

The door furthest up the hall is where the scent is strongest. Nearly overpowering. Ajar, dusty sunlight peeks out of it, yolky and orange. Gabe doesn’t know the protocol beyond a handful of guesses. Following the noise, and the smell, he puts a hand on the door. He takes a step inside.
He knows what to expect: but he is still not prepared.

The room is thick with smoke. It takes Gabe a second for his eyes to adjust, and the moment they do, he realises what he’s looking at. Or who.

Jesse.

The kid on his hands and knees as some alpha takes him toughly from behind, his head hung as he hisses and stutters. Quite unlike what Gabe has seen before: Jesse is wild. Pushing his hips back, and demanding more. Hands as fists in the sheets. The alpha abides, hands on the kid’s hips, clawing at him, new bruises over old as they go at it. He looks just as delirious as Jesse, and it’s short wonder why. The kid’s opening looks gorgeously tight, dripping with slick, his cock rosy and present between his legs, every bit as glistening. The shape of the alpha’s cock is visible and low at the kid’s abdomen as it’s driven in, again and again.

Gabe just watches, for a few seconds. Watches as the alpha takes a handful of the kid’s sweaty, feather-hair and tugs his head back. The pain must be sharp and sweet. Jesse makes a noise of absolute pleasure. Without opening his eyes or touching his cock, he cums hard in two or three thick spurts, some that catch his chest, but most of which catch in the sheets. The alpha does not stop. Jesse barely even softens.

He sounds delirious, too. Likely dosed to keep him insatiable with god knows what. Gabe can see it in the red, bleary sort of look of the kid’s eyes whenever they come into focus, like he only knows what’s half of going on.

Probably for the best, too. There are three or so other men sat around, watching, and a pale-faced woman. She’s sat closest to the bed.

Gabe figures the men sat are waiting to take turns with the kid. Not a one of them can be younger than thirty. Not a one of them looks gentle.

His hand remains on the door as he turns his eyes back to Jesse. The kid is getting frustrated about something --desperate, forcing his hips backwards onto the alpha as he hisses out. “More.”

The alpha has his hand wrapped around the base of his cock to quell his knot, half-in the kid, looking at the pale-faced woman as if for permission. She shakes her head.

It’s of no interest to the kid. His hip move backwards again, frantically, searching for more as he turns his head and looks around dazedly for the alpha. “I --I need--...”

The alpha looks about ready to burst. Still tugging on the kid’s hair, he starts to move again, carefully, fucking Jesse on about half of his cock before tipping his own head back and coughing out a shout, pulling back in time to paint the kid’s sloppy hole with cum. Some gets on his back.

He lets go of Jesse after that, and the kid starts twisting in the sheets. Whatever is in his system is distressing him something awful. He thrashes like that, seeking something more --desperate to be filled. Drained, visibly, the alpha climbs to the edge of the mattress pad and fumbles to tuck himself back into trousers.

Hadn’t even undressed to fuck the kid. It figures.
Still delirious, Jesse continues to jerk in the sheets as the alpha departs. One of the other men puts out his cigar and stands. He’s already hard. His belt is already undone. As he goes over, the pale-faced woman at Jesse’s bedside looks over at Gabe and clears her throat. “You want a throw?”

He looks over at her, his hand still on the door, rendered nearly brainless by the scent of Jesse. “What?” He manages, after a few seconds.

The woman repeats herself, shortly. “You want a throw or not?”

Despite himself, Gabe considers it. He feels his nostrils flare as he catches the sight of what’s happening on the bed: the new arrival dragging Jesse onto his back and sucking a dak, ugly mark onto his shoulder as the kid twists and whines hysterically. There’s so little of him. It would be easy for any of these larger men to break the kid, like a toothpick, and even just watching alone makes Gabe’s teeth bare. Awakens something in him he felt for Jack, once.

Something Jack has never asked for, or needed.

It’s not like they’re married. It’s not like they can stand each other right now. And he’d be so good to Jesse. Tender and present. Would give the kid everything he needs.

He opens his mouth to speak.

He thinks of Jack, again.

He shakes his head.

- Transport back to Grand Mesa takes forty minutes, at most.

Gabe’s skin itches the entire time: his blood hot and stirring madly. His mouth as every bit as dry and arid as the desert. He knows a rut when he feels it.

The evening is barely gracing base as he comes upon it. Feels quiet and half-asleep, and Gabe hasn’t felt so tense and electric that just the stillness bothers him. The moment he feels the air, he starts to walk. Seeking home. Desperate for relief: for Jack.

Where he’ll be isn’t immediately obvious, and every second that passes without contact is torturous, stretched long and thin. Gabe doesn’t know what to do with himself, or where to put his hands. He probably reeks of that kid --Jesse’s scent all over him, the thought under his skin, burning him alive. The way he was twisting in those sheets: desperate to be stuffed full and fucked proper--...Gabe feels practically brainless to think about it.

Near the point of inanity, he finds Jack in his office, looking over some holoslides absently, sudden to desperately sensitive the the familiar wintergreen that he knows is his mate’s: weak to it as he enters without knocking, impatient and noisy.

And Jack --his Jack, perfect and cold in his expression, looks up as if to ask but only gets as far as opening his mouth a little before Gabe has to say something dumb like he’s tired of fighting --tired of something, and Jack wants to believe it enough that he minimises the slides, hand trembling as he does.
Gabe thinks they shouldn’t say another word to each other. Crosses the room in a straight line as Jack comes to standing. Matching him. He gets it, Doesn’t open his mouth at all, waiting for Gabe to do something. There’s no clue to his expression: if he’s going to be resistant or willing. Gabe can’t wait forever.

They kiss, but only incidentally, as he leans to press his nose into Jack’s neck and breathe in deeply the smell of home. He wants creosote and dust out of his system – wants Jesse out of his head so badly that it’s come to this, that he’s almost loving when he bites, gently, works his teeth and lips across the column of Jack’s neck until he feels weakness and desire. Never takes long.

Jack isn’t like the kid an inch, not desperate or needy or submissive in the least. Not with the way he kisses hard, everywhere but his mate’s mouth, pulling Gabe on top of him so that they’re over the weight of the desk (and not for the first time). There’s little tenderness to it: not with the way they part only for Jack to take off his jacket and kick off his trousers, encouraging Gabe to do the same.

He’s quick on the uptake, desperate for a bit of relief, hard since the ‘high side’ and almost furious with desire. Not the only one, either. Jack leans back up to take his neck again and as Gabe takes his mate’s thigh, he can feel the suggestion of wetness there and makes a stifled noise of pleasure. He doesn’t know how much longer he can wait -- or if he could even make himself.

He doesn’t look to Jack’s eyes for permission as he undoes his belt, undressing only as much as need be before moving his hips to better align himself. Jack is of a similar mind, impatient, moving down to meet him, and in the joint action, he sinks into Jack’s tight, wet heat.

He’s so hot and familiar that Gabe doesn’t have any thoughts at all. God, he can’t do anything but move. He leans forward to get as deep as he can, and then begins to move, resting his weight on his elbows and thrusting hungrily. It’s rough, but there are no complaints. Jack’s body is so inviting, drawing him deeper, slick clinging to Gabe’s cock with every movement. Above him, Jack makes a noise of pleasure.

He thinks of Jesse.

Wonders if the kid has ever been knotted. God, what if he was the kid’s first? Fucked him nice and full just like he’d been begging for; the kid’s stomach swelling with his knot and his cum? The thought is so obscene that he feels himself moving harder and crueller, almost recklessly. It wrings another noise out of Jack and ruins the facade. Can’t pretend he’s fucking anyone else like that.

So Gabe opens his eyes and finds Jack’s face as he moves, angling his hips to try to make Jack cry out again. It works, after a few seconds, Jack tightening and hissing out, but never once looking up at Gabe or opening his eyes. There was a time, he thinks, when they’d look at nothing but each other. When all of this was different -- worse, somehow. The world was ending and they were just pretending not to notice.

The smell of wintergreen and frost takes him back to it: the way Jack’s scent can still get into his bones and his hindbrain. Different to the smell of the desert: ephemera, he knows, meaningless to the grand scheme of things. It’s loveless; Gabe doesn’t care. All he’s concerned with is the sensation of Jack around him: of making him lose his mind.

It’s working, he thinks, when Jack coughs out this little whine like he’s trying to hide his own pleasure, and then Gabe can feel hot cum on his chest as Jack climaxes, tightening gorgeously, shoving a hand into his mouth to keep himself quiet. He doesn’t soften, though. Knows they’re not done yet.
Not with the way he keeps moving, become more and more erratic, desperate to make Jack cum again and desperate to knot him. It’s only a matter of time. He can feel it building at his base as he continues to move, pleasure flaring in him even more when he feels teeth on his neck, sinking in almost cruelly.

“Fuck,” He hisses, nearly lightheaded, savouring the sensation of distant pain lost underneath the overwhelming tide of pleasure and the way it stings so sweetly. Even when Jack removes his teeth, the feeling of hot breath on his neck is enough for Gabe to feel his knot swelling. Breathlessly, coughing out, he manages, “Gonna fill--”

“Just do it.” Jack hisses. It’s so sharp and typical that Gabe does, feeling the tug of the command and driving his hips home before he can help himself, locking them together as he cums hard into the tight heat of Jack, filling him with all he has as hips hips stop moving and they remain flush together like that.

Jack might have cum again --it’s difficult to tell. All he’s aware of is his heart hammering in his ears and the feeling of being inside Jack. The scent of his mate is thick, now, joining with his own, so familiar and intimate that he releases, there, going boneless over Jack’s body on the desk, forgetting the bad blood between the two of them. Convinced by the scene that’s it’s ten years ago somehow and they still think the world of one another.

Jack seems to abide, catching his own breath, and carefully saying nothing; removed from it all. He’s only sentimental when it’s his heat, really, the sudden influx of hormones that make his tongue less sharp and turn him back into the pet he was when Gabe met him: the one soft on Indiana and forgiveness.

Sentimental himself, Gabe thinks about touching Jack’s face or maybe kissing him or something, but he gets no further than halfway before the sound of an incoming call alerts him. A holoscreen appears to his side, with a name below ‘Director J K Fallowfield’.

He looks at Jack, half-smiling, going to say, “Can’t catch a brea--”

Jack clamps a hand cover his mouth lovelessly. He swallows like he’s trying to sort his breathing as he touches the slide, opening the call.

“Director.” His voice is ironed out into some semblance of control. His tone strives to be breezy. “Would it be possible to put you on hold for a few second? I don’t have access to the minutes of the last meeting from my office.”

There’s silence for a few seconds. Gabe watches Jack’s face --how neutral it is, despite the colour high in his cheeks, and how his chest is rising and falling and how Gabe is still deep in him. The hand Jack has over his mouth is warm. Gabe watches him, and mercifully doesn’t make a move or a sound.

“Certainly.” the voice on the other line says.

That seems to ease Jack, some and he sighs quietly, gently, nodding to himself. “Thank-you.” He says, still sounding so collected. “I won’t be a moment.”

Raising a slightly-trembling hand, he touches the holoscreen again and holds the call.
The moment the screen goes inactive, his arm drops. He lets out a breath Gabe wasn’t aware he’d been holding. The silence is strange. Gabe remains where he is, unsure of what to do, until he feels a hand on his chest, above where his heart is still beating, pushing him away. Mostly softened, anyway, he’s carefully to withdraw from Jack, staggering backwards off the desk on legs that barely feel like they work.

The sight of Jack, still lying back on the desk, cum on his abdomen, slick coating the inside of his thighs, looked absolute fucked as he gets his bearings does Gabe no good at all. He almost feels less relieved than when he’d first come in: ungainly and full of desire. His head conjures up images of Jesse again. He bites his tongue.

Dressing himself, Jack barely glances over his shoulder. It’s a wonder he can stand. “Haven’t you got some place to be?”

There it is. Gabe had wondered how long they could go without drawing blood. He does up his belt again and pauses by the door. “We still not square?”

The omega huffs out a laugh. “Not even close.”

That much figures. Gabe didn’t think he’d get off the hook so easily.

He walks himself to the door and out into the hall.

He swears he can smell the desert.
Chapter Notes

this for toto, who i love dearly.

there are more exams. my suffering continues. take this trash.

Investigating ties to Los Muertos is the next step. Gabe is in no hurry.

He’s hesitant to go back so soon to the kid. Maybe just to outrun his embarrassment. Or that he
doesn’t want to admit how Jesse has him pegged --how the smell of creosote and desert air and
orange asphalt got under his skin in a second and he can’t wipe it clean from his mind.

Things remain even strange between him and Jack. They rest in the same bed once or twice: likely
because they don’t see eachother at all in the days that pass. The less they talk, the easier it seems to
get.

One night, he even feels Jack sidle up to him, unconscious soft and familiar. Without ever opening
his eyes, he nuzzles into Gabe and winds his arms around his alpha, and Gabe nearly says, ‘Jack, I’m
lost’, though he knows the other man is sleeping.

But he leaves it be. The touch is so comforting after so long adrift. He relaxes into it. Allows himself
to cherish it because he doesn’t know how long it has been since he’s last been given this.

Probably before he left, he knows. The blood test had been in the morning. Jack had his head on
Gabe’s shoulder as they laid next to eachother. It seems awful, now: how hopeful Jack had been,
how his voice was warm with some kind of nostalgia when he’d said he felt different. That it could
happen this time. After years and years of nothingness, and some deep-down, naive part of Jack,
untouched by the sustained cruelty of his reality, still believed Angela would look him in the eye in
the morning with a smile and tell him he was pregnant.

So Gabe did the only thing he could think to do. He left his mate sleeping. He slipped away quietly to
New Mexico to touch base there and avoid the fallout and the look Jack gets when his jaw tightens
and his eyes go dead like he’s trying not to cry.

When Jack’s arms wind around him again, he realises how much he’d missed it.

It occurs to him, then, that he doesn’t blame Jack for anything of this. Has never thought that it was
some fault of Jack’s or SEP’s effect’s or his weird luck. Deep down, he thinks it’s his fault. That
maybe he’s empty. That he’s the broken one.

Jack, in his mind’s eye, remains unmarred and perfect. There could never be anything wrong with
him: nothing he could be blamed for.

And he’s terrified by that.
Gabe can only outrun his humiliation for so long. He has to go back to New Mexico eventually.

He finally overcomes his hesitance after nearly a week, when he feels enough time has passed, and he feels removed enough from Jesse (and Jesse’s scent, and the way he looks with his back arched and his head thrown back, fucked out and dizzy).

He prays the worst of it is over as he comes upon Jesse’s place once more.

‘No Vac’ greets him on the way in. It is the only sign of life. No men loitering outside the building. No pale-faced woman. No Johnny Ringo. He heads inside quietly and cautiously, preparing himself for whatever fresh horrors he’ll see.

The door is closed, this time. Gabe doesn’t test if it’s locked. He only knocks.

There’s some clambering inside: noises of life that indicate somebody is home, before he hears the rattle of a chain as the door opens. It swings only a few inches before stopped short by a chain, and in the gap, he can see dark, suspicious eyes narrowed, surveying the hall.

Jesse brightens when he sees who it is, though. Swings the door to as he takes off the chain and opens it again, fully, standing there in his underwear, and yet still the most clothed Gabe has ever seen him. There’s a cigarette in his mouth that tips upwards as he smiles, taking it out to speak.

“Gabriel.” He says, in that sort of musical drawl of his that sounds ever-playful. “Fancy seein’ you back here.”

It’s an odd statement, full of implication that he’s not sure he fully understands. No matter --Jesse qualifies for him all the same. “Didn’t think you’d show your face around me.” He says, as he turns, and waves a hand, implicitly leading Gabe back into his room that feels humid and steamy, but not from the smoke of cigarettes.

Thoughtlessly, he comes inside, watching the strange sway of Jesse’s hips as he walks, tempestuous and proud. A column of silver smoke trails over his shoulder. “Figured you’d be too --humiliated, or whatever.” the kid turns and smiles at him. “Maybe that’s just me.”

At this point, Gabe is completely lost. He closes the door behind him and looks to Jesse for some indication or explanation, and when none is found he asks, blandly, “Mind telling me what you’re talking about?”

The kid turns to face him, leaning in the doorframe to what must be a bathroom. There are lots of bruises on him that Gabe can now see better in the light. On his ankles and wrists and thighs. Likely from where he would have been held down. There’s one high on his cheek, too, some gaudy poppy mark right beneath his eyes. One that’s less explainable.

“You came down to the high side, I’m told.” Jesse says, easily, looking elsewhere of Gabriel as he flicks ash absently onto the floor. “Didn’t like what’cha saw, apparently.”

How strange it is for there to be hurt in the kid’s voice, of all things. Jesse’s comfortable with pain by now, he guesses, but not rejection. There isn’t a great deal of it in his line of work.

“It weren’t like that.” Gabe says, then, leaning against the wall to light a cigarette of his own almost as something to do. His eyes flick up to the kid’s face to scan for hurt again before he’s conscious of
the action. Jesse just shrugs.

“Sure it weren’t.” The kid sniffs. He puts the cigarette back in his mouth. When his arm moves, Gabe thinks he can count the outline of most of his ribs.

He doesn’t know why he doesn’t just drop the issue. Why it’s suddenly so important to him to let Jesse know it wasn’t out of a lack of desire. Jesus, the kid must know he’s gotten under Gabriel’s skin by now --that he hallucinates the desert air in places it’s never been and doesn’t belong.

So he swallows awkwardly and says, “Wasn’t what I expected.”

“Hm?” Jesse’s mouth hints at amusement.

“More people than I thought’d be there.” He says. That seems to make Jesse laugh as he crosses the room, coming to sit on the bed.

“How’d you reckon I make money?” He shrugs, easily. Gabe wishes he;d say that the drugs tide him over. That he does this because he likes to, and not because in the infinite cruelty of the universe, it’s all he has. “Some pay to watch. Some pay to fuck. Need Miss Marie there to keep ‘em in line.”

So that explains the presence of the pale-faced woman. Gabe hadn’t been able to discern, at the time, if she was a patron or proprietary, but given the way the alphas had been looking at her --the way she had addressed Gabe, and not Jesse or any of the others, says just about as much. He recalls her face, trying to tell her character from it, somehow. Wondering if there’s somebody in Jesse’s life looking out for him.

“She your go-between?” Gabe asks, to satisfy his curiosity about it all. Trying to understand why Jesse seems willing to stay where he is, doing what he is.

“But that kind of arrangement.” Jesse shakes his head. “We ain’t a contract deal. She jus’ keeps the louses in line, makes sure nobody gets too rough, make sure I stay in one piece.” He takes another drag of his cigarette. “Takes half of what I make on those days, o’course.”

“That’s steep.” Somehow Gabe could tell it wasn’t out of the goodness of her heart. It doesn’t seem to bother Jesse. He shrugs again.

“That’s business.” He says, easily. “Least this way I don’t end up dead, or catchin’ nothing --or in the family way, y’know.” Jesse’s voice trails off and he looks off distantly like something has occurred to him that haunts him. The universal irony is lost on the kid, Gabe thinks, that among the hazards of his lifestyle, he counts sickness and pregnancy alike. There’s a joke in there --something about Jack, but the kid is talking again before he can make it. “Marie’s just like Johnny. Necessary evil.”

It sounds so easy. So resigned. Gabe has to wonder if there was ever a time when Jesse didn’t think so --when he had any defiance to fight back with. He looks at the mark on the kid’s face again. He looks away. “Johnny Ringo your go-between?”

Jesse makes a noise that’s halfway between agreement and disagreement. “Sorta.” He shrugs. “He brings the pills, then he takes his cut.”

“Money?” Gabe hears himself ask it quickly, even if he doesn’t really want a full answer to it. The kid shrugs again.
“Mostly.” He says, almost childlike in the whisper of it, before he stands up and puts his cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray. “Speakin’ of --I only do pills the day after a heat finishes. Y’want that kind of business, I heard there’s a bunny ranch other side of the 66.”

Gabe watches him cross the room again and go to his drawer for another cigarette. He’d say something if he wasn’t already smoking, There’s limits to his hypocrisy, he thinks (he hopes). So he just sits quietly as the kid lights up again, tracing over the rings of bruises and marks he can see -- faint scratch marks up the kid’s back he hadn’t noted before.

It occurs to him to ask, then. “That why your door was locked?”

The kid turns, impassively. “Hm?” Then the meaning seems to dawn on him and he smiles sort of carelessly. “Oh, yeah.” He smiles out of one half of his mouth. “Some don’t take ‘no’ for an answer. They get all sorts of sour --like little boys.” It would be antipathetic from anybody else, but it sounds amused and warm, somehow, out of the kids mouth. The idea of it is so terrible, but to Jesse, it seems like a joke.

Isn’t that awful? That he can smile with those marks on his face --that he can laugh with a mouth of blood?

Gabe watches the kid with sad eyes. He looks at the door. “What’d you let me in for, then?”

The kid laughs again at that. He leans over the bed, and the curve of his spine is both worryingly present and still seductive, somehow. Maybe it’s the ease of the movement. Scrappy thing, but he still moves like water, leaning down to fix his sheets. “Well, ’cause for one thing, y’made it insultingly clear how bad you don’t want me.” Then he turns back and is looking up at Gabe. His mouth looks pretty, in a coy sort of smile. “An’ for another, I might make an exception for you, if y’ask real nice.”

Gabe can still remember the sweetness of him in heat. He daren’t even think about how soft the kid’s neck would be, unmarked. The dusky column of flesh all his to devour. To savour.

His mouth is dry when he shakes his head. “It’s not like that.”

Jesse snorts. “S’exactly like that.” He blinks lazily. “If y’want it to be.” his legs part again. The bite mark is barely visible anymore. The bruises are less strident. Gabe swallows.

“Glass.” He asks, by way of a response. “You got some?”

The kid laughs, again, a little bitterly, closing his legs as he lies back on the bed to reach the drawer. It would be easy --too easy, to climb onto that bed, over him. To pin him, there, like that. To hiss the thin arch of his neck and gentle him into opening those legs again. There’s not enough in the room to distract him.

When Jesse is sat back up, he’s holding a clear, white bag and a bottle of pills.

“Didn’t take you for the type.” He says, staring at the powder in the bag absently, and then back up at Gabe. “But between you an’ me, I’d take the Dexies instead.” He rattles the pill bottle for emphasis. “I crash too hard on the Glass. Leaves me useless for about a day jus’ getting over it.”

Gabe stares at the white of the powder. He knows a little about what Los Muertos shift. None of the
stuff is particularly clean or pure, and it’s a terrible sort of wonder the kid isn’t dead. “You taken everything you sell?”

The kid shrugs. “Most of it once or twice. But ‘sides cigarettes, I ain’t much for it.” He grins as if to present his mouth in a way. “Miss Marie says I’ll stay cuter with teeth, anyhow.”

Gabe feels odd at the relief that occurs to him. That some backwater pimp is what’s keeping Jesse from a pill addiction isn’t much good news, but it’s some. He never would have pegged Jesse for an addict, anyway. He’s mostly clean of track marks, has all of his teeth. Despite how thin he looks, he seems in decent health.

It seems awful to think that prison might do him good. Three square meals a day. Nobody around to leave bruises on his face.

Gabe takes out a roll of notes from his back jeans pocket. He looks at Jesse sadly. “You could do something else.” He says, then. Before he’s thought it through.

Jesse looks at him sideways. “What’chu mean?”

A little uselessly, Gabe looks around the room for some indication of who the kid might be. What his dreams and ambitions are. The kid could never have hoped for a life like this when he was a child, but even that thought seems impossible. Boys like Jesse feel as if they were never anyone’s children, like the big math just wasted youth on them as a fleeting joke.

Gabe shrugs. He doesn’t want to sound so damn invested. “You could do something besides this.” He gestures around the room.

Jesse looks at him, then. Really looks at him, and it’s without the usual musicality or mirth that his gaze holds. Like he’s looking right into all of the dark parts of Gabe. Like he’s deciding whether or not he can trust him.

Something doesn’t seem to weigh up. The kid’s smile looks painful when he huffs out some laugh. “You hirin’? Cause I don’t see much else I could do b’sides this.”

Gabe looks at him. His hands ache to hold the kid. “You could leave.”

Jesse looks away. His eyebrows raise. He rolls his eyes. “Leave. Sure.” He shrugs, defensively, before his mind starts to wander, and this almost shy look overcomes him. “Mexico.” He says, then, quietly, childishly. “Good place for raisin’ horses, I’m told. An’ --an’ I’m real good with ‘em. Horses, I mean.”

The way he talks about it --so secretly. So careful besides all the rest he’s mentioned. It’s tragic in it’s frailty.

“So go.” Gabe says. And that does it; puts Jesse back on the defensive. Takes all the wonderment and secret joy right out of his voice as he huffs mirthlessly.

“Not that simple.” Jesse shakes his head. “Let’s say I made good this week. Let’s say I made five-hundred on pills and six-hundred on heat.” He looks at Gabe witheringly. “Johnny Ringo takes sity percent on the pills. Miss Marie takes half on the other bit. That’s--..”
The kid’s mind sets to work.

“Five-hundred.” Gabe supplies, easily.

The kid nods. “Right. Minus protection money, courtesy a’ Deadlock --nevermind rent and cigarettes
and food.” He sighs, and leans back on the bed, putting the powder bag, and the pills on his
nightstand. “Even land in Mexico costs somethin’, an’ no matter what I do or how careful I am,
ever seems t’be more than a couple hundred bucks stuffed in my mattress.”

Sighing airily, Jesse shrugs, suddenly carefree --or at least, appearing so. He plays with a corner of
the sheets and hums to himself like there’s nothing to be done.

“You could--...” Gabe cuts himself off. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. “You could get out of
this.”

Jesse laughs again. Crueller. “You gonna save my soul, Gabriel? S’at it?” He shakes his head again
like he’s gone with it. “Maybe --maybe I ain’t in anythin’ I wanna get out of. I mean, this is --this is
my home.” He gestures around the dismal room. “I got everythin’ I need, right here.”

There’s a finality to the way he says it. This resolute look in his eye that’s pained. Gabe doesn’t
press. Doesn’t want to call more attention on the reality of the kid. How he lives in this room like he
does, or in other rooms, with men that crawl all over him. How he’ll keep doing it until he dries up or
dies and they find his body naked in the red dirt of the dustbowl.

Clever boy as he is, Jesse tilts his head and looks at Gabe, coyly. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Gabe asks, impassively, his mind still stuck on the image of Jesse’s body, out
there in the dirt.

“ *You* could do somethin’ else ‘sides this, too. Sharp guy like you, buyin’ pills off a whore south-
wester a’ nowhere.” Jesse spreads out in the bed with another easy smile. “There’s a reason you’re
here, ain’t there?”

Gabe thinks about the kid in handcuffs again. He shrugs. Of course, that doesn’t satisfy the kid at all.

“You said you wasn’t a cop, an’ I can believe that. But you’re --you’re somethin’.” He looks Gabe
up and down again with this enhanced interest, his eyes seeming to go deeper, and the lazy pleasure
in his gaze only making the experience feel intense in a strange way. “It’s somethin’ to do with that
mark, ain’t it? Why you’re here, an’ not someplace nicer?”

A minute ago Jesse had no defense. He was as open as the skies out here at night, like stars with no
clothes on, magnificent and fragile. It seems impossible now. Seems like Gabe has always felt this
stricken and defensive. His mind winds to Jack despite it all. He feels conscious of the mating mark.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” He says, eventually, fighting the urge to cover the faint evidence of Jack’s
teeth with a hand. It’s not a shameful thing. If anything, it’s --it’s sad.

Jesse tilts his head again. “He gone?” He’s talking about the giver of the mark. About Jack, just
without the name. Good. Gabe doesn’t want to ever hear Jack’s name come out of a mouth like that.

“No.” Gabe says, before he can think to help it. Trying to convince himself. It doesn’t hurt to
pretend. Makes it worse, though, doesn’t it? Makes Jesse sit up and look all giddy, like a shark sizing
up a prey it’s about to cut into. He climbs to his feet, too, advancing on Gabe slowly, and reaching out like he’s going to try to touch the older man’s neck.

“Oh, Gabriel.” He grins, cruelly. “You get your heart broken?” He leans over Gabe, who feels overexposed and sensitive in the wake of the kid’s hot skin so close to him. “You lose somebody--”

The kid’s fingertip graces his neck. That’s as far as it gets.

Then Gabe is standing above him, frighteningly quickly, twisting the kid’s wrist and rendering his arm useless to him. It happens in an instant --Jesse is trapped suddenly, slower than Gabe, freezing in the wake of it. He doesn’t try to jerk back or away. His wrist would well break if he did.

They remain there. Gabe speaks, first. He sounds completely impassive.

“You got your hand on a big red button that you do not want to push.” He says, very carefully, watching Jesse’s face. The kid is still frozen, watching him intently, waiting for --for something. Like he’s been here before; only, those other times were followed by something much, much worse. “You got it?”

In a tiny voice, the kid nods. “I got it.”

Then the atmosphere breaks. He lets go of Jesse and the kid scrambles backwards onto the bed, looking wounded in his pride --but deeper than that, too. Scared. Genuinely frightened. Like all of the men in all of the world could mark and bruise and bleed him but this is only thing that could shake Jesse’s bravado.

Distantly, Gabe thinks he has crossed some line. Violated some portion of their agreement.

But Jesse did first.

(But he’s just a kid.)

“I’ll take the Dexies.” Gabe says, eventually. “Just a handful.”

They make business in moderate silence. Jesse’s gaze has migrated from curious to venomous, but he doesn’t stoop to say anything about it.

Gabe can tell he’s said the wrong thing, but leaves it be.

He tracks himself back out into the red rock, reminding himself of why he’s here.

And that reason isn’t Jesse.

-

The frustration comes to a head somehow, in it’s own way.

Jack is still angry --less so, and they fuck a few more times. It’s still strange and sort of impersonal. They’re both thinking of different people, or different times. Neither of them have the gall to mention it, or be hurt by it. It’s not always in Jack’s office. It migrates back into his bedroom at one point, but they remain loveless about it, for what it is.
Time passes like that, as it has a habit of doing so. Maybe things are better, but they’re still not good.

The ghost of Jack is still haunting him. Of how bright-eyed they used to be. About the first time they were stationed here, in Colorado, and the building was so new that the heating didn’t work and they wandered around the empty corridors in their underwear in search of relief which ended with them sleeping in the fridge doorway.

Jack hardly sleeps, these days. He retires to bed later than Gabriel, and rises before him, at first light, so that the only evidence he’s ever even been there to begin with is the faint sensation of body heat and the once-sweet sharpness of wintergreen and pine.

Weeks pass in the same way, until one night in particular, when Gabe passes by one of the open mat rooms, and hears the warm sound of laughter and peers inside to investigate.

The first thing he sees is Fareeha. It’s her laughter he’d heard, he realises, and she stands, smiling in her gi, shaking her head like she’s witnessing something silly. As he turns to look further into the room, he sees Jack, kneeling in front of her. He’s smiling, too, but in a way Gabe hasn’t seen in a long time.

Jesus, when he first sees it, he thinks he must somehow be looking back in time. All of the frantic, cruel coldness that seems intrinsic to Jack these days is gone. He looks so unguarded when he stands, extending his arms back out as they get into position. He puts a hand on the girl to control her collar - never hard. Always was gentle with Fareeha -- always looked at her like she was the most precious thing in the world, even when she was a newborn.

Her hands come up, too, one the sleeve of his gi, and the other on his lapel.

“Ready?” He asks her. “You can put your hand on the back of the neck, too.”

Faeeha doesn’t look remotely intimidated. “I know.” She says, smiling. “Ready.”

She executes the move with all the precision and grace as her mother -- slowly, bringing her knee up to his ribs as he grips fast with her hands. Her other leg glides up in an easy motion and comes in front of his neck, and there’s a brief pause before she pulls him down and then leans back, pulling on the arm she has trapped, but mostly for effect. The armbar was nice. Slow, but nice.

Jack doesn’t resist her a bit. He taps the mat and they part. Fareeha is quicker on her feet, and then they’re back into how Gabe found them, with Jack kneeling, and smiling at her genially. “That’s much better.” He says, climbing to his feet. “I can guarantee it’ll be easier with somebody smaller than me.”

Fareeha nods. She has a wise look about her face already. She’s twelve or thirteen. Gabe can’t remember exactly, but already she looks so much like her mother. Beyond her features, too, in the proud way she holds herself, and her patience.

They go for a few more practise throws, and over some joint locks. Jack was always meticulous about his form, and it makes him a great teacher. Gabe continues to watch. He wonders if it’s ever painful for Jack, on days like this. It must be. Neither of them planned to still be here, Not for this long. The rest of the world was afforded peace because of Overwatch -- Jack always did say that he wanted a part of it.
Immovable object as he is, though. Jack won’t leave here unless some external force acts upon him.

The more Gabe watches, the more somehow painful the scene becomes. So he doesn’t watch for much longer. Instead, he hands most of the dexies over to the lab and checks the status of the supply lines they’re tightening their hold on. In a few weeks, Deadlock will be a handful of red dust and a couple of blood shadows in the desert, and nothing more.

He goes to bed thinking about Jesse’s hand on his neck. About their conversation --and figures he was wrong, lying there in the dark, without Jack besides him.

It does hurt to pretend.

-

In his dream, he is back in the red rock of Mexico.

Only here, there is no neon buzz of the ‘no vac’ sign. The chair he is in belongs to a different time and place, too --a cheap, metal thing that they used in the SEP. The room he is in is the same, though. Thin, ugly curtains. The faith shroud of cigarette smoke that blurs his sight. The same sheets on the bed. The room is red.

It’s made, here, the corners folded neatly, presented to it. The only thing in his line of sight. Gabe cannot say if he’s tied down or merely stays down, but either way, he never moves from the seat. The force that keeps him there is unknown.

A cigarette is burning, forgotten, in the overflowing ashtray on the nightstand. It’s all gabe can watch.

Eventually, he hears a noise behind him like that of a door opening, and then the light, gentle padding of footsteps that grow closer before they pass him. He feels the faint radiation of body heat, and the lingering smolder of the scent of dust and creosote. Of Jesse.

The room is red --and now Gabe fully appreciates that as the kid’s bare back comes into sight. Jesse wears nothing. In a lax wrist, he holds rope.

He saunters past and turns, looking down at the older man, his face expressionless, his eyes suggestive. It’s only then the colour occurs to Gabe in how much darker Jesse looks. His lips are reddest of all. They remain in a mysterious line as he leans down. Gets on his knees before Gabe.

Their eye contact remains unbroken and silent. All that’s there to hear is Gabe’s breath as it hitches. As Jesse goes onto his knees and lifts his hands. The rope presents itself.

Gabe can’t think to move at all. It occurs to no part of him as he stares into the depths of Jesse’s eyes. He makes no protest as the first knot is tied, and then tightened, keeping his left wrist bound to the chair. Jesse ties the other faster. His scent is overwhelming. A lesser man might have grabbed the boy by now, but Gabe remains, as if in some superhuman inertia.

The kid rises seamlessly. He walks the few feet between the chair and the made bed before he perches on the end. There’s no clue to his expression. Something fleets in his eyes as he find’s Gabe’s again, but whatever it is, it’s gone by the time Jesse’s thighs part, and his hand slips between them.
Here, the air is smoky and the room is red and there are no marks on Jesse’s thighs. The silence is cut only by the way the kid’s breath hitches and the gorgeous and obscene wet sound his hand makes as his fingers curve and disappear. The kid’s cock is rosy and perfect. He bites his lip. He looks at Gabe somehow more intensely.

His hand continues to move. Jesse’s breath hitches as hips move with it, in this tantalising circular motion. The kid’s neck arches as he angles his arm, his breath hitching again, some small, delicious gasp working its way out of his throat. His eyelids flutter. His lips are red. He looks furious with desire.

Gabe can only watch. Can only spectate as the kid’s hand works faster and his cock starts to leak pre and his thighs tense and relax tantalisingly. His lips never stop moving. The wet sound of slick coating Jesse’s fingers muffle the soft whimpers that catch on the end of the kid’s breath. He smells good enough to devour.

He doesn’t stop, either. If anything, his movements gain passion and speed, almost ragged in the ministration, until Jesse’s head tosses itself back and his eyes squeeze shut as he cries out, quiet and desperate and sweet --so fucking sweet.

It’s the first time they break eye contact: as Jesse finishes. His breathing is a mess. The way his chest moves with it is beautiful. The way he pulls his hands away and leaves a shining trail of slick all over his thighs as he brings his fingers into his mouth is worse. The his eyes open again, and his eyes are smiling.

After a few seconds of letting the air return to him, the kid stands, lazy and pleasure-ridden. He crosses the dark room again slowly. He comes to stop in front of Gabe, but makes no move to untie the older man’s ands, or get back down on his knees.

No, instead, standing so close and smelling so delectable, he leans down so that his lips are level to Gabe’s ear, and his neck is level to Gabe’s neck.

His lips are red, and he can hear the kid smile just before he says--

“Gabe?”

Jack’s voice falls out of the kid’s mouth.

There’s a hand on his shoulder.

Jesse is gone. He wakes.

In the dark, he can feel a presence at his back that is familiar but distant. The sheets feel too heavy on him. He’s burning up.

Jack speaks again. His voice sounds level. The smell of fresh frost and wintergreen is almost an assault. “You dreaming?”

“I’m fine.” Gabe is quick to speak. Perhaps too much so. His skin feels like the rubber of a balloon. He feels warm and sickly. “Go back to sleep.”

After he collects himself, he moves from the stifling, oppressive ocean of sheets and into the adjacent
bathroom. The water from the faucet is a cold relief. He wipes his face down for some effect, and reaches an unmarked bottle near the top of the cabinet shelf behind the mirror.

There are a few benzos left in there.

He takes two and gets back into bed.

He does not dream any further.
so this was going to be super different originally. welp.

my last ever uni exam was yesterday (confetti!) and i bring this chapter to you as a warning not to accept gifts from strange men.

Deadlock are starting to dry up.

The Shimada supply routes are almost entirely plugged by now. Quietly intercepted or complicated beyond reason. He briefs Jack about it by email when asked, but they never speak in person about it.

So much the better, in that case. There’s no talking to Jack about anything at the moment. Not with Overwatch under the scrutiny that it is. They need a win, he knows, and badly --or at least, bad enough that he’s even looking to Blackwatch to provide it. Not that it’ll come out like that; Overwatch will have saved the day, and elsewhere, quietly, Gabe will celebrate with his best men.

He’s never had a quarrel with that part of things. There are certain shades of limelight that can wreck a man’s complexion.

He sees that in Jack these days. The few solitary moments Gabe catches him in: fixing himself in the bathroom mirror or the like, he looks practically grey. Sick with stress and worry, tired and stretched too-thin. Gabe’s instinct in those moments is trite and unhelpful: he wants to comfort his mate. To drag both their souls back to bed and sleep away a few hard months.

But he never does, of course.

It’s times like this that confuse Gabe about the direction of their lives. How could they bring children into this? Even if Jack lived up to his word --even if he were willing to step down or step away or give all of this up, no matter where they went they’d run into themselves, and each other.

Better the devil you know, he thinks. Maybe this is all a blessing in disguise.

He continues to make plans for the sting. He starts to focus on the Los Muertos routes.

Jesse remains under his skin.

One night, he sits in bed browsing a holoscreen absently, his hand moving while his mind gets stuck on sarsaparilla and creosote as Jack moves around the room, readying for sleep. He’s not thinking of anything at all, really, until Jack comes past him and scans the screen curiously.

“You going to see about Los Muertos?” He asks, plainly.

And, hell, Gabe is lost for an answer or explanation until he comes back to himself and realises he’s looking at a breakdown of information about Mexico. About the average temperature in the
summertime and the humidity and the working opportunities. ‘Good place for raisin’ horses’ continues to occur to him again, and again. His chest tightens.

Eventually, Gabe replies. “Just a curiosity.” He dismisses the thought and closes the slide. Tries not to think any more on it.

Jack doesn’t let it lie, of course. Never can. “Well, if it’ll make things move faster--”

“Things are moving as fast as they can.”

The words come out sharp. Gabe has never appreciated the insinuation that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, even in this case, when it’s marginally warranted. He bristles at the words --remembering how tightly Jack’s star had been hitched to his wagon in their first few years.

Give a man a title and a fancy coat and a bit of power, he thinks, and they’ll fall in all kinds of love with themselves.

Jack sits in his side of the bed. His eyebrows are raised in that derisive way like he’s thinking about taking another cheap shot. “Forgive my curiosity, then.” He mutters, tiredly. “I just need this resolved quickly.”

Gabe rolls his eyes. “It will be.” he says, decisively, more to quiet his mate than anything else. His thoughts stray purposefully from the box in his mind marked ‘Jesse’, ignoring the fact that the sooner this is over, the sooner the kid will be in handcuffs, or a cell, or lost in the system. The sooner he’ll be nought to Gabe but a memory.

The thought shouldn’t be so awful when Jack is getting himself under the sheets. Why should he care so much about that kid when his mate of these last fifteen years is right there besides him? Familiar winter should seduce him, but when Jack glances at him and looks every bit as cold as his scent, Gabe thinks he knows why he seems to ache for the desert.

It’s not Jack’s fault, he knows. The pressure would be enough to make anybody sick. And Jack had really thought, too. Had planned to step down the moment they made a gravestone for Deadlock so he could afford himself a peaceful pregnancy and a quiet few years.

What does it matter when Jack’s voice sounds so reedy and distant when he says, “I’m turning off the light.”

“Sure.” Gabe only replies by instinct. He doesn’t know what else there is to say, and by the time anything has occurred to him, the room is bathed in darkness and the sheets shift like Jack’s turned to lie on his side so his back is facing his mate. The distance is bizarre --that they’re under the same sheets but there’s enough space so that they might never have to touch.

After a while of lying there, breathing in the impressions of Jack’s scent on the sheets, Gabe murmurs, “Jack?”

His mate’s voice comes quickly. He’s not yet asleep either. “What?”

It occurs to Gabe then that he hardly knows what to say. “Are things--” He begins, before his mind changes as to how to phrase the question. “Are you okay?” And when no immediate answer comes, he says, “I know things have been ugly with the public.”
Jack is quiet for a while. Then, when he does make a noise, it’s some joyless huff of laughter. “It’s -- it’s fine.”

But it isn’t fine, and Gabe isn’t asking because he wants to see how well Jack can play at pretend, or how much he can endure quietly. They used to tell each other everything.

“It’s not fine.” He murmurs, eventually, moving towards the other body in the bed as if it will diminish any of the distance that’s really between them. “Talk to me.” his voice comes out small and soft, trying to find that place between Jack’s fourth and fifth rib that he used to exist in. When it doesn’t seem to be working, he continues. “We’re on the same team.”

“Are we?” Jack huffs. He doesn’t make a move to face Gabe again. Doesn’t relax into his mate’s touch --as tightly-wound as ever. Or, at least, until the silence that comes between them seems to hit him. It’s all that will ever come about their conversations until Jack learns to stop playing so wounded.

Fast learner he is.

After a few minutes, something in him seems to uncoil and he leans back against Gabe a little. His eyes are on some corner of the room when he mumbles, “I just--...I get tired, sometimes.” The words come out so hesitantly. Honesty looks good on Jack; makes him look younger. He swallows with a little difficulty. His voice becomes even more scarce in substance. “I was so ready to --to walk away, you know?”

His eyes open a little, then, like he’s become conscious of Gabe’s gaze on him. He won’t emotionally undress without a prompt: hesitant thing. Slave to laws of silence.

So Gabe says, “I know.”, feeling bold enough to touch a part of his mate’s arm. Jack doesn’t recoil. The touch develops into some measure of intimacy: even if it’s just Gabe’s thumb moving in a back and forth motion.

Coaxed by it, Jack’s head shakes slightly and he looks like he’s trying on some bitter smile. “The worst part is I still would be, too, if--...” His eyes close again, but they can’t hide that dead look that comes over their blueness when he’s trying to amputate his pain.

The words reach Gabe like a bullet terrified of blood. He can hardly stand to exist in the room with them. He feels godless; and guilty. “There’s still time.” He murmurs, as if just to say something. As if to convince them both that neither is to blame and it’s just a twist of fate that will come undone eventually. “You --you’re due soon, and we--”

Jack’s head shakes again. His posture becomes resistant. “Who are you trying to kid?” He coughs, bitterly. “‘We’.”

Gabe withdraws his touch. Part of him regrets his mercy --thinks he was misled to ever think that Jack ever needed it. “I’m not trying to kid anybody.” He says, at a genuine loss, pulling away to sit himself up. “What are you talking about?”

His distance is met with derision, and Jack’s rolling his eyes again. “I’m not blind, Gabe.” He says, quietly --bitterly. Looking away. “You smell different. You’re using again.” Absently, his hand comes up to touch his neck like he want to wipe his mating mark away. “You spend all your time in New Mexico.”
Gabe’s wind winds to Jesse. To his dreamlike recollection of the kid leaning down, his body dusky and gorgeous and wanting, and the way his scent seemed to hang in the air like the impression of cigarette smoke.

He thinks about Mexico. He realises he has been entirely silent in the face of Jack’s accusations.

And it’s too late to speak, now.

Jack’s eyes drop. He looks almost defeated.

In a whisper, he says, “If there was somebody else--”

“What?” Gabe’s throat is dry. He wonders if he has ever dragged his body back to bed still smelling like desert and creosote. If the desire on him is obvious, since Jack underwent this change at some point and became hard, and frantic, and cruel.

Even in his cruellest moments, Jack has never been unfaithful.

And neither has Gabe.

(Yet.)

He hears Jack sigh, as if frustrated. “If there was--”

“There’s nobody else.” The words occur to him to say, then. Too late, really. He couldn’t have spoken sooner, somehow: as if he had to tolerate the accusation before denying it. As if, in some silent, small way, he wants to be held accountable for how his mind winds to Jesse even when he lies here.

Jack’s tongue worries at his molars, and his mouth remains open, looking unconvinced. His shoulders shrug. “Level with me here, Gabe.”

Gabe exasperates. “I am levelling.” It’s as if Jack wants him to confess something --like he’s looking for a reason that things have been like this. Never could face the fact that they’re every bit as bad for eachother as they are good. To be sure, though, he repeats himself softer, reaching out for Jack again.”There’s nobody else.” He sighs. “Things have just been --tough, lately. For all of us.”

The touch is permitted. Jack remains, staring at something else for a few seconds, weighing up the words that he’s heard. He looks translucent in dim light, sometimes, and the white parts of his hair look like starlight. As much affection as Gabe has for Jack, he knows; they are silly to look for qualities in eachother that are no longer there.

After a while, Jack nods. “I hope so.” He says, quietly, before leaning back down on his arm and coming to lay on his side again. “It’ll be over soon.”

Jack closes his eyes.

But he never says what is ending.

- Los Muertos routes get tightened next. The ones that run on old cattle trails, coming up through
Mexico and north through parts of Texas.

The dexies had been Mexican, alright. Refined and potent as all hell. Gabe’s not usually much for uppers anyway. He knows they might have couriers anyway, and more illicit means of getting their merchandise, but it’s where they start. Shimada routes have been starved good for a few weeks, now. The desert is starting to get desperate.

He’s cautious to head back down to New Mexico for a few days. Jack’s heat is still overdue, which isn’t uncommon. He can’t take with his comm with him. If it started and he didn’t know --and didn’t get back for a few hours, Jack would suffer.

And then, of course, he would suffer.

The later the heat is, the worse it is, he knows. Even with a superordinate amount of pigheadedness and a high ceiling for pain, it can be too much. Jack used to medicate for it: sedatives, sometimes, and the like. Gabe sort of wishes he still did, instead of running a fever, delirious and sickly, all for the sake of trying as much as possible.

Still, a few days pass quietly without symptom. Gabe grants himself a pass to head back down to the dusty mesa.

Strange to say that when he comes upon Jesse’s place, he lingers outside, fearful but drawn all at once. His conversation with Jack is no less salient as the dream he’d had. Just the smell and colour of the dust on his shoes is enough to put him back in the dim of the room once more. He kicks at it, absently. He keeps walking.

In the corridor, he passes by a man in a large, brimmed hat who makes no move to create room for Gabe as he walks. His hands are at his belt, fixing. He reeks of whiskey. There’s a revolver in a holster on his left side. It isn’t until after he’s passed that it occurs to Gabe who it was: Johnny Ringo.

He thinks to say something too late. By that time, he’s at Jesse’s door.

It takes him nearly a full minute to raise his fist and knock on the door.

It takes less than ten seconds for a voice inside to holler back. “S’open.”

Gabe steps in expecting to see what he’d seen last time he’s seen Johnny Ringo here. Blood on innocent, mysterious skin. The kid sprawled lazily in the sheets like a cat in the sunlight. No dice.

No: today Jesse is wearing some loose t-shirt as he sits on his unmade bed. There are assortments of clear bags in front of him, some with powders and tabs, and others with pills. He’s counting some in his hand. It doesn’t look like there’s altogether much there. On the nightstand is a tin can of something --Gabe doesn’t bother to read it, as the label is obscured by the amber bottle next to it that’s almost empty.

Jesse looks up and brightens a little, straightening his back. The smile he gives Gabe is cruel in it’s pleasure, as if ignorant to their altercation the last time he was here, and lazy, too. The kid might be a little drunk.

“Gabriel.” The kid says, coolly, if a little slurred. “How’d you find the Dexies?”

Truthfully, Gabe hadn’t bothered with the dexies. He’s never felt the need to go any faster. He
already has trouble sleeping, anyway. He shrugs. “They were fine.” Impassively, he comes to lean by the wall. “Think I liked the benzos more.”

Jesse’s head tilts the other way so he’s looking back towards the bed. His eyes are a little bleary. He might be on something else, besides the bottle. “Ain’t that too bad.” He says, playfully. “I only got a few of those left. Plenty of dexies, mind.”

His eyes wind their way back up to Gabe. The kid can’t seem to keep his mouth closed, and it looks like some strange sort of smile. It’s a strange gaze to be pinned under.

Gabe swallows. “Johnny Ringo holding out on you?” his hand finds his top pocket, in search of cigarettes, only to find he’s out. It’s a nasty enough habit that he doesn’t spoke around Jack if only to avoid the lecture.

On the bed, Jesse fidgets practically incessantly. “Not hardly.” His head shakes. “Things are tight all over, I hear. Johnny did me jus’ fine.” Reaching out, he manages to grasp the can on the nightstand and pull it onto the bed. “I feel practically spoiled.”

It’s only then Gabe reads the label. Peaches, he realises. They’re canned peaches.

“You’re a cheap date.” Gabe says, mildly, mostly for himself. It makes Jesse laugh something nice though, ending the warm sound of it with a cute shrug.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” The kid snorts, sitting himself up a bit better. “I’ll have you know the peaches were a gift.” Reaching out, he starts to sort the collection on the bed in a small way --starting by filling a labelled orange bottle with, what Gabe assumes, is the corresponding bag.

He watches, curious, noting how little of everything there is. More powder and tabs than pills, which is only a sign that things are working. “What’s the occasion?”

Jesse’s head lifts absently. His eyes are different: pupils oppressive in their width and blackness. Coupled with the nervous sort of energy the kid has and how no part of him is content to remain still, he’d chalk it up to something like coke on top of the alcohol. “S’my birthday.”

That thought gives him pause.

Not for any real, meaningful reason. It’s just that Gabe can’t really imagine Jesse existing outside of this room. Can’t ever imagine the kid ever having been born, or anyone’s child. It doesn’t help that there are all those pills and tabs and powders on the bed. That business continues as usual, and Jesse’s life remains unaltered for the occasion save a single can of tinned peaches.

“Oh,” Gabe makes a noise of understanding. He jams his fists into his pockets, awkwardly.

The kid doesn’t share his awkwardness. Symptom of his own cocksure nature or whatever he’s on; it’s not clear. “Don’t feel bad for not gettin’ me nothin’.” He grins. “I might let you leave a tip t’day, business bein’ like this.”

Curious, Gabe has to ask, “What d’you mean?”

When the orange bottle is filled, Jesse sits up on the bed to put it in his bedside draw. He leaves the draw open as he goes to the other side of the bed, standing on wavy legs as he crosses the room, staggering a little, picking up the bottle on the nightstand comfortable.
Jesse shrugs as he goes back to the bed. He sits gracelessly, like he’d have fallen otherwise. “Route’s are dryin’ out. Can’t even get a bag of ‘ludes worth a damn this week. Not to mention other necessities.” Shaking his head, Jesse takes a short swig and hisses at the taste of it. A pink tongue darts briefly out of his mouth to wet his lips. “So much for Mexico.”

The word brings back an image of the slide Gabe had been looking at. He thinks about average rainfall. He thinks about good ranching land, sprung from where the war had laid waste to cities and towns and torn back pockets of nature.

But Mexico might as well be a million miles away from Jesse, drunk and smiling, somehow, in a tiny room with nought to his name but a can of peaches.

The kid’s smile does fade for a second, though. Some sort of thoughtfulness comes across him, or maybe for a second he’s more whiskey than cocaine and the reality of it gets to him. Lasts less than two seconds, but when he’s back to smiling, the brilliance of the expression has faded. Jesse still looks bleary, wasted and sickly.

Sniffing, then, putting the bottle down on the bedside table, he looks down at the assortment on the bed like he can just will away the thought of Mexico. “It was benzos you wanted, right?”

Gabe nods, despite the futility of the question. “Yeah.”

He watches Jesse search through the assortment. He wishes there was something he could say. Wishes he could secret the kid away on a train now and be done with it. He’d rather see Jesse south of here than in prison.

But he’d rather see him in prison than out here, still.

Struck, then, feeling for Jesse (and of all the stupid thing a man could feel), he murmurs, “Happy birthday, kid.”

Jesse looks back up at him. “I got thirty pills for $60.”

Gabe nods. “Throw in a cigarette.” he reaches into his back pocket to take out some unmarked notes. No wallet. No nothing. Here, he could be anybody. Helps him to kid himself that he’s some force of good in Jesse’s life, and not some go-between or some bandit. Really, he’s just another force acting upon the kid, eroding his outer surfaces over time.

Jesse’s hands are a little shaky. He hands over the pill bottle first, unlike the first time they’d met. Trusts Gabe enough to wait on the notes. Jesse says nothing at Benjamin Franklin’s face staring up at him on the note. He puts on on the nightstand, under the bottle.

After that, the kid hands him a cigarette and they smoke together in relative silence. Gabe thinks about Jack, and his heat. He feels like he has a tick of a stopwatch instead of a pulse inside his wrist. The moment he’s done with the cigarette, he stands to go.

Jesse sits up as he does. “You leavin’ so soon?” He asks. His voice sounds a little reedy.

Gabe turns around to look at him. “What?” He asks, in a neutral way, wondering if he’s forgotten anything. Nothing in sight. Just the kid, sat on the bed like that, holding a bottle of whiskey. His brown eyes look so wide, like two singularities.
The kid looks almost reluctant to speak for a second. Like he’s hoping the scene will do the talking for him. “You can, uh --y’can take here, y’know. Some do, an’ I don’t mind it.”

Gabe stays by the door. The kid smiles like he’s laughing at himself. He lifts the bottle again.

“Don’t make me drink alone.” Jesse says, eventually.

And it is his birthday, after all.

And he’ll be gone soon, after all.

Gabe looks at the back of the door. His nose itches at the faint, almost imperceptible tang of the room’s air, and how it always smells like Jesse does. The cigarettes do nothing to obscure the faint, base layer of creosote and sarsaparilla and sweetness.

He turns back towards Jesse.

He nods. “Sure.”

Jesse blinks before he even considers to smile. “Well,” He says, leaning back on his hands, before a smirk overcomes his beary features at last. “Colour me surprised.” He makes room on the bed, even though there’s plenty. What a slight thing the kid is: elegant and long in his youthfulness. He’s nearly as tall as gabe, but loses inches in the way he slouches. “Ain’t no chairs.” the kid croons. “Come sit by me.”

Some distant part of Gabe tells him to reconsider. That Jack is back at base, sick with stress, alone and half-likely in heat by now.

But it’s too distant. Gabe can hardly hear it in his own mind as he perches himself on the bed, taking the bottle he’s offered cautiously.

“It’s good for what ails ya.” Jesse murmurs, his fingers brushing Gabe’s as the bottle is passed. It’s not good remotely, as it turns out. It’s some blended rye brand he’s not familiar with, bitter as all hell with a sharp, acidic aftertaste that doesn’t sit very well in his stomach. The sort better as a battery acid than an aperitif.

Jesse notes the reaction with great pleasure. “Don’t worry, y’get used to it--”

“Don’t get cute.” Gabe says, to suppress a laugh. He hands the bottle back and opts instead to open the bottle of benzos. Forensics already have a set. These are for his own pleasure. Just to get that click in his head which makes his thoughts quieter and their edges less sharp.

He takes three pills as Jesse laughs. “Can’t get cute.” He croons again, taking an easy sip of whiskey, in a way that a kid so young has no business doing. “I am cute.”

The kid isn’t wrong, but it won’t do him any good to hear it. So Gabe swallows the pills and leans back on his own hands. “Another cigarette?”

Jesse hums a pleased tone. He goes rifling back through his bedside draw for the pack, and inside Gabe can see there are packages of a few sterile needles. Not for the kid, he hopes, but it’s difficult to say. At least they’re clean. He produces another cigarette quickly. It’s a cheap brand, but they hit the
spot, all the same.

Jesse lights them both and leaves his burning in the glass ashtray on the bedside as he gets up. He picks up one of the clear bags filled with white powder --the one not sealed, and wanders into the bathroom with it. From inside, he hollers. “Y’want a line?”

It’s a tempting offer. The benzos would counteract the twitchier side effects of coke, but he’s in no mood to go back to Jack wired. The coke out here is probably cut with something cheap like baking powder. Gabe doesn’t suit a nosebleed.

“I’m fine.” He says, impassively. The benzos won’t kick in for a few ten more minutes or so. He can wait. It’s the kid’s birthday, after all. He smokes patiently in the room and looks around. The peaches are still sealed in their can, innocent on the side. There’s a dreamcatcher on the dresser: not hanging, but still whimsical and sort of pretty. There aren’t many other personal possessions in the room: makes it feel more intimate, somehow.

Jesse comes back into the room after a couple of seconds to take the hundred dollar bill off of his nightstand. “Y’know.” He says, easily, over his shoulder as he staggers back to the bathroom. “I never done lines with a hundred before.”

“Special occasion, indeed.” Gabe calls, after him. He blows a warped ring of smoke, and tries for another, but gets nowhere. He waits on Jesse. It feels strange to hear him in the bathroom: snorting, and then hissing out in reaction.

“Fuck,” The kid whispers, hotly. “Goddamn.”

There’s not much more noise from the room. When the kid comes back in his eyes are even more pupil-heavy. He looks alert in a twitchy sense. There’s a little blood in the corner of his nose.

What Gabe notices first is that he’s not wearing a shirt, but he at least tries to think of other things.

Jesse saunters back towards the bed and takes the bottle again. He’s so gorgeous and lithe. Gabe could crush him with a single hand if he wanted to.

“Put some clothes on.” He says, distantly, sucking hard on the cigarette.

Jesse laughs, airily. “Not my forte.” He grins. He comes to sit back on the bed. “Y’aint much for good talkin’ tonight.”

Gabe shrugs. “Lot on my mind.”

Jesse looks at him in some unreadable way. “But y’aint good for drinkin’, either.” His head tilts again. He laughs at a joke that hasn’t been told yet. “What are y’good for, Gabriel?”

Everything out of the kid’s mouth is so obscene. Gabe hardly knows what to do with himself, or how to react. He looks at the blood at the corner of Jesse’s nose. The same shade of red as his lips in the dream. The kid doesn’t notice he’s being watched, utterly comfortable, lying down on the bed again.

If Gabe is going to stay he figures, he might as well satisfy a few curiosities. So he continues to smoke, and looks at the floor when he talks, to betray his interest. “Saw Johnny Ringo come by earlier.” he opens with, easily. “Business as usual today?”
Jesse fidgets some more. He wipes the blood from his nose childishly. “He fucked me, if that’s what you’re askin’.” The kid says, crassly. The notion doesn’t bother him. “Left me somethin’ special, tho, all for myself’.” One of his arms covers over to nudge at the other white powder bag he’d left on the bed, still sealed. The content are a mystery. Heroin, maybe.

Gabe looks at it blandly, and then back at the kid. The thought of Johnny Ringo’s hands anywhere on that mysterious skin is disquieting. He should be making nice conversation.

Putting out the cigarette in the ashtray, he asks, “How’d you get mixed up with Deadlock, anyhow?” It seems natural to him to ask about about the past. About where Jesse came from, if only to rationalise that he’s real.

Not that the kid minds. He shuffles on the bed and clicks his tongue. “Not much else to do round these parts,” he says, noncommittally. “Older brother of somebody or other I knew needed a lookout now an’ then, or maybe to deliver a message. After a while, they trusted me enough to distribute smalltime.” Jesse turns onto his side and shrugs. “Musta been about sixteen when I presented, an’ then when I started hustlin’, I caught Johnny’s eye, I guess.”

Gabe’s jaw tenses. He doesn’t know what to say. For some obscene reason, he thinks about Jack. Behind him, he hears another short laugh that sounds far emptier. “Wasn’t the first eye I’d caught, mind.”

Then he’s quiet, and they both have to sit in the aftermath of the remark. Gabe can’t imagine the kid any younger than he is, now. And refuses to imagine him as more naïve, or helpless. All of that cruelty, he thinks, and Jesse is lying there, stretched out and smiling, thinking he has the world in a can of peaches.

A hand lands on his thigh and brings him back to the present with the confidence of it’s touch. “How’bout you, Gabriel?” Jesse’s eyes are hot on him. “How’d you get mixed up in all this?”

He’s still thinking of Jack when the question reaches him. About how maybe that’s the reason he first put himself out here --so far away from the others, and how that’s what’s kept him here. He can hardly handle facing Jack some days, and on better ones he only feels guilty.

“Needed something to help me get to sleep.” He says, quietly. “Got curious about what else you had.”

“But y’aunt local, are ya?” Jesse moves closer to him. He has this focus to his voice that was absent before. “Must be an awful long way to come up for some pills. What are ya, I-40 southside?”

“Sort of a drifter.” Gabe says, weakly. It’s not entirely wrong. With Jack, the anchor keeping them together doesn’t even reach the bottom of a bathtub. “I more ended up here than came.”

“Awful lotta times to end up in a place.” The kid laughs at that, a short and uproarious noise. “Y’sure you aint sweet on me, Gabriel?” He makes some move to get closer, and Gabe can feel hot hot and smooth his skin is. The kid would fit entirely in his lap, and he’d look pretty doing it. The incident in Jack’s office occurs to him: how Jesse would look over a desk.

He moves to the edge of the bed, awkwardly, extricating himself from the touch. “Desperate don’t look good on you, kid.”
Jesse snorts. If he’s hurt, he covers it with this mean little look that makes his eyes look all the smaller in their darkening. “Please,” He says derisively. “I bet you’d beg to fuck me.” Turning onto his side, the kid stretches out again. “Could have me all to yourself if y’wanted, next time my heat comes. I know you thought about it.”

Gabe stands up if only to get away from it. His mouth feels cottony and dry. He keeps thinking about Jack’s office. About Jack, too. What is he still doing here? “Sure you do.” He says, blandly. “You got a phone around here?”

Jesse shimmies onto his elbows. “Payphone jus’ out back.” He looks at Gabe with this hazy air of suspicion, but it’s not focused enough to warrant a response. He hardly thinks his cover is about to be exposed by this coke-addled kid. “Somethin’ important?”

Gabe’s head shakes. “Not really.” He says, making for the door, if only to get out of the heat and the scent of the room. “Eat your peaches. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

He glances back at Jesse in the door, who’s just about reached the end of the bed, with the other, sealed white powder bag in his hand. “Think I’ll skip straight to th’ main course, if y’don’t mind.”

It’s not as if Gabe needs to say a word of guidance, anyway. His brain is starting to feel ever-so-slightly hazier as the benzos begin to register to him. It’d be a nice way to come back to base: softer from the effect, so he can go straight to bed and sleep dreamlessly --or straight to Jack when he’s overwrought enough to actually want his mate. Peaceful, he thinks. Perfect.

Leaving Jesse here is his only option, and always has been, but tonight it feels somehow crueller. The kid deserves a goodbye, at least. Who knows if he’ll be by again before the sting takes place, and the lot of them are rounded up once and for all. He doesn’t want Jesse’s last sight of him to be the one holding out the handcuffs and signing the papers.

Doesn’t want his last sight of Jesse to be filled with this longing, either. The phonecall isn’t for his sentiment.

If Jack’s in heat, he’ll go.

And if not; he’ll stay.

He finds the payphone roundabout where Jesse had told him to look. Out back, just outside of the relief of a tin-roof awning. It’s rusted to all hell, but takes the coins without protest. He doesn’t dial for Jack, nor dial in the traditional sense at all. There’s a twelve-digit serial code for the comms they use that’s accessible via the traditional grid, and he uses Ana’s.

Force of nature as she is, he thinks somehow it will be easier to hear her than Jack. And, by this point, if his time is here, Jack won’t be able to get too many words out anyway.

As per the number type, there is no dialtone. Just flat and pessimistic silence until a click registers.

“Gabriel, I assume.” She says, flatly. Her assumptions are usually correct. A sharp-shooter by every description. He’s loathe to admit that he can see why Jack is so close to her. “Is there a reason you’re calling from New Mexico this late into the evening? And from an unregistered landline?”

“That’s classified.” he says --and with great pleasure, too. It’s classified to the extent that he says it is,
and a lie hadn’t occurred to him by then end of her question. He can feel his thoughts and inner
machinations turning slower: this way is easier. “Calling about Jack.”

“What about him?” Her voice is sharp and unsympathetic.

Gabe sighs. “Status?”

Ana isn’t cruel. Least of all to Jack. Information of this nature isn’t something she’d use for
bargaining. They both know how bad it gets for the omega sometimes: bad enough that it’s woth
than whatever they’re not seeing eye-to-eye on at the time. “No change.” She says. “I can’t expect
things will stay this way for long.”

“Fine.” He says, frankly relieved --absolved from his guilt if only for a moment. “That’s fine.”

Ana’s tongue clicks dismissively. “You had better be planning to get back tonight.”

“Obviously.” Gabe sighs. “Just wrapping up, actually.”

She makes some derisive noise. “Mm, is that a fact?”

He grinds his jaw shut. “That’s a fact. Over and out.”

The call ends like that. Less than forty-five seconds of talking and he feels as if all of the peace he’s
been cultivating, and all the quietness of his thoughts has been lost. The woman has a talent, he’ll
give her that. And her inexhaustible guilt over Fareeha when it comes to Jack keeps her tongue that
consistently sharp.

She’s right, nonetheless. He should be making his way back. He doesn’t want Jack to suffer. He
doesn’t want to miss their window.

He lets go of the rusted phone and walks back around to the front of the building --sad as it is, faded
and dusty. He pauses at the juncture, half-turned towards the slow walk back into town where he can
call for transport and head back to base, and half-turned back towards the warm sweetness of the kid.

He should make up a goodbye, at least. It’d be the kind thing to do.

So he heads back inside, quietly.

The hallway air is still and empty as before. The door is ajar, as he’d left it. He comes inside to see
the peaches still on the nightstand, and the door to the bathroom open. The half-finished bottle
remains on the dresser. Evening light makes the amber look deeper.

He doesn’t hear Jesse shuffling or snorting. Figured the moment he was back in the room he’d be
treated to another wisecrack.

No --the air is too still. Everthing trained in him sense something horribly wrong, and his eyes flick to
the corner of his vision as he stills himself, wondering if there’s something awful and unspeakable
looming behind him (and not ahead of him).

He doesn’t look. He takes a silent step forward. He calls out, trying to still his nerves.

“Jesse?”
The air remains artificial with stillness. And for the first time, it appears the kid has nothing to say.

He looks at the light coming in from the open bathroom door in utter resignation. Even before he goes inside, he knows, he will not like when he finds.

“Jesse?” He tries again. As if hope alone could save.

Laws of silence won’t work. He moves towards the light. He pushes on the wood of the door.

White powder is all over the sink. White and red --bright gaudy spatterings that lead the pair of feet he sees, at rest. The rest is hidden by the door. Gabe knows it before he comes all the way inside. Knew it from the first time he saw the kid.

The kid is inside.

Eyes open, crimson-black blood all over his mouth, obscured by the yellow of the foam at his lips and dribbling down his chin. Blood in his hair. A stillness to his chest. No twitches. No blinking. His body looks even smaller like that on the floor.

It’s like that he finds him.

It’s like that Jesse lies.
so it would have been super-fun to do a pulp fiction hollywood route, but i thought it would be more responsible to do a realistic take on this kind of scenario. adrenaline can't treat an opiod overdose. heroin can contain fentanyl which can cause an OD in trace amounts. look after yourselves!

also welcome the conclusion of one checkhov's gun and the arrival of another!

warning: typos galore probably

Gabriel has seen a multitude of corpses in his life.

He will not count Jesse among that number.

One look at the boy; he drops to his knees in an instant. His hands feel dangerous and clumsy and too-big as he feels over the body.

No, not --not the body. Jesse: who he touches desperately, angling his face up and handling the warm column of his neck in some search for a pulse. It tilts the kid’s head, limply, and then those still-open eyes are staring vacantly up at him. His pupils are like pinpricks, his irises half-disappeared into the whites behind his eyelids.

Yet, Gabe finds it. Faint; slower than he can possibly reconcile. A pulse.

It wrings some awful, glad laugh out of him like he can hardly believe it. No part of him looks further or entertains the notion that his heart rate is fading. Then what? What could he possibly say if Jesse goes under: that he lived a good long nineteen years? That he’ll be remembered? No, he won’t reconcile it. He can’t.

Desperate, then --guilty, he surges forward and drags Jesse’s body to half-sitting, trying to hear to the kid’s breathing.

No breath. Some awful, strangled guttering like the kid is choking on some of his own fluids.

Instinctively, he pulls back, trying to angle Jesse onto his side a little better. Trying to buy himself a second away from that awful noise just to figure out what to do. What a second will do: Jesse quietens, if there’s any good in that. No more sounds escape his blue lips. (And Jesus, why blue?)

Angry, suddenly --furious at this all, he jerks the kid’s body up a little more again and takes Jesse’s chin hard to angle his face up. One of his nostrils is dark and welling with blood. The smear on his face glistens with the foam of saliva. Gabe hardly knows what to do; so he strikes the kid. Not hard - -but efficiently. Trying to shock him back into consciousness or something. Trying to raise that sinking, cinderblock heart-rate.

And when that doesn’t work he finds himself shaking the kid’s body. Helpless to it: desperate to hear
some response.

Jesse is quiet. Unresponsive. Hardly a person.

In his horror, then: in his closeness to the advance of death creeping over the kid’s features and turning him to past tense, Gabe draws back. He moves backwards on his hands so that not a part of them are touching. And then --then he just looks, because he fears it’s all he can do. There’s no light in Jesse’s eyes to watch disappear.

It occurs to him, then, to check the powder all over the sink. The ‘main course’. If it can offer some clue as to what to do, because he doesn’t know. He only ever dabbled. He only ever took anything to get some sleep, and now Jesse’s body is cooling and Gabe can’t do a damn thing to help. In all his years and all he’d seen, there was never a protocol for this.

Hesitant to leave Jesse, he looks over his shoulder at the sink, and then back at the kid. He shakes him again in some last-ditch attempt to resuscitate him. “Come on, kid.” He hears himself say, in a hot whisper. “C’mon.”

The words don’t seem to reach Jesse. Another guttering moan escapes out of his blue lips and Gabe knows if he’s going to act now he better do it quickly.

He lays down Jesse’s body with the gentlest hands he can. Like the kid’s skin is porcelain. That something else might get him first seems so ridiculous, but this may be the last mercy he can bestow. He lays the kid down gently on his side, careful that he won’t choke on whatever it is trying to some up from inside of him. He takes Jesse’s pulse one last time, too, irregular and faint, but still there.

The last thing he does is let go, or look away. They both seem too painful to bear: so he does them both at once.

Then Jesse is helpless but for himself. Gabe brings himself to standing and turns back to the sink. To the slanderous sight of blood. God, he was gone so momentarily that the sight of it jars his every understanding of the world. He ignores his reflection in the mirror cabinet above the sink and finds the bag, half-dropped over the basin, mostly empty from where it was either placed or knocked. He dips a finger in enough to cover the tip and rubs it into his gums.

There’s no sensation of numbness. It’s not cocaine.

Terrified, then, he draws back, looking up suddenly as if horrified. And it’s only then he even sees it.

The mirror cabinet door is ever-so-slightly ajar. There’s a faint, bloody smear in the corner. Like Jesse was trying to open it? Trying to reach for something inside, before--...

The kid’s been distributing for at least some time, now. There has to be something in here --in this room or this building, that’s used to treat overdoses or fits or something. Maybe if there’s an epipen or some rudimentary biotics, then Gabe can do something, so he reaches up and tears the cabinet door open helplessly, and with enough force that a few bottles fall into the sink and clatter.

He searches among the remnants furiously. Children’s chewable vitamins, a bottle of suncream, an empty box of band-aids, some unlabelled, empty pill packages --he searches through them angrily, riffling through the mess and finding no helpful drop of adrenaline or the familiar yellow he associates with a lifeline.
He looks over his shoulder, then, to Jesse’s body, and that only makes the panic inside of him worse. If he’s going to do something he needs to do it now because Jesse is still lying there and his lips are blue and his skin is grey and it’s his birthday and Gabe doesn’t want to watch him die tonight.

He reaches up into the cabinet to look for something else, but his hands are shaking, and it knocks down a mess of objects into the sink, the sound obscene to his ears, blinking in shock and trying to search anew. No friendly yellows greet his eyes. Nothing he recognises—a cardboard pill packet for allergy relief. An empty toothpaste tube. A gun, at the top, with a few rounds of ammunition standing proudly at it’s side. Jesse is going to die.

He looks up at what remains in the cabinet. A bottle of mouthwash. Some more sterile needles in their packaging. A sleek black case remains at the very top, on the other side of the shelf from the gun. He can barely see it, it’s stuck so far back onto the shelf, but it’s there, nonetheless. And that bloody smear was on the glass for a reason. There has to be something in here. Coincidence would be too cruel.

He reaches up for it, the thin, black hard case not very much different from a case for glasses. There’s a white seam running around the middle, and the emblem of a red cross on top. A word is written across the top that he does not recognise: ‘Naloxone’.

His shaking hands unzip it quickly, and in doing so, two needles in their packaging fall onto the floor gracelessly. Those are the only things that fall, the other contents secured in a pocket to the tid of the case. Beneath where the syringes were sat, he sees it — paper. Printed instructions, clear as day: ‘Follow the save me steps below to respond.’

Six boxes are listed. Two transparent white vials tremble in his grasp on the case.

He wonders, for a brief moment, if there’s still something he can do.

And then he isn’t wondering at all.

Cheap linoleum on his knees. At Jesse’s side once more, wiping the blood away from his mouth. Tilting the kid’s head back to keep his mouth open. His breathing is barely present — shallower than if sleeping, and Jesus Christ he wishes Jesse were just sleeping, drowsing away the evening in some peace. Maybe this is peaceful for him — but he’s alone in that.

It’s with a grim sort of deja vu that Gabe turns the kid onto his back. He hears another gasping, rattling sort of choke as he moves his hands over jesse’s heart — palms flat, elbows not bent, just like he was trained. He feels barely a flutter beneath them. He starts moving.

At least a hundred compressions a minute: a number he committed to memory. He thinks about their last training assessment on basic field medicine. About jumping into cold water to fish weighted mannequins off of swimming pool floors, and cleaning wounds. How to check for breathing and set broken bones and the like. Years ago, now — long enough that at the time it had seemed almost like a game: rolling Jack onto his side as he shut his eyes and played possum as best he could, smiling all the while.

Jesse isn’t smiling. His eyes are, at least, closed. The flutters of his pulse feel dangerously faint before they become ever-so-slightly present again. He counts to 45. He stops.

There’s going to be no good administering the kid anything if he’s not breathing. He moves around the body. He moves the kid’s head back again to open his airway.
A tiny trail of blood escapes Jesse’s nose as Gabe pinches it shut. He hesitates over the kid’s mouth momentarily—the awful thought occurring to him that he never imagined their mouths meeting like this. The sort of joke Jack used to enjoy. Then he covers Jesse’s smeared mouth with his own and breathes, tentatively, watching the bare of the kid’s chest for movement.

It rises. It rises, and he breathes for Jesse twice in total, before he moves back away. His head is spinning. His mouth is like ash.

Another forty-five compressions. Another two breaths. He daren’t take Jesse’s pulse again before that, terrified to find that he hasn’t done enough. Terrified to find that where he feared putting the kid behind bars or leaving him to the mercy of men like Johnny Ringo, Jesse’s fate was inevitable either way.

After that, it’s with God. He finds himself bold enough to move away. Jesse might be in a better condition, or maybe Gabe is hallucinating it—his guilt absolving him by imagining the slight and fragile movement of Jesse’s chest. The wispy, tiny croak the kid makes like he’s struggling desperately to remain in this world. What did—what did the paper say? What does he do now?

Gabe leans over the kid’s body to reach the case again, pulling it towards himself, and tearing out the instructions. Step five: ‘Muscular injection: 1mL of naloxone. Continue to provide breaths until the person is breathing on their own’. The picture above has highlighted areas for suggested administration of the shot.

The glass vials are similar to medications he’s seen before. Been in and out of an infirmary enough times to know to wipe down the rubber top of the vial. He doesn’t wash his hands, wary of time, unable to even look at Jesse’s face. He leans back over the take a needle packet and unwraps it hurriedly, taking the cap off, his hands suddenly eerily steady as he pierces the rubber top.

He lifts the vial so that the needle is pointing up, now. He withdraws it carefully. 1mL, as described: tapping away the formation of any air in the needle.

Hesitation never suited him. Never did anybody any good. He’s decisive about the motion when he grips the kid’s thigh tight with his free hand and injects with the other.

Then his other hand lets go. He pulls back the needle plunger to check for blood. To check he hasn’t made matters even worse by hitting a blood vessel. For once, all clear.

Gabe removes the needle. He sits back on his hands.

He just—watches, for a few seconds. Nothing about the lifeless transparency of the drug fills him with confidence. It feels as if he’s going to need something more to save the kid; something he does not readily possess. But it isn’t a matter of missing parts right now. It matters deeply: and that really is the least of it.

Moments pass, and then miracle of miracles: Jesse’s chest begins to rise, incrementally, ever-so-slightly, independently of assistance, gaining some force until the kid’s now-close deye tighten and then this awful, wrenching noise occurs. As his head is, thankfully facing the side, the hot vomit comes up out of him easily.

Gabe isn’t so easily goaded into hope. He reaches out for Jesse’s wrist again, feeling for his pulse. Elevated from before, trying desperately to return to it’s baseline. His eyes are trying to open, but
only get so far as red, lost slits, trying to ground himself in the room but seeming hopelessly lost. Consciousness. Life: even if the kid coughs. Tries to move. He’s weak as all hell.

For a few seconds, Gabe merely watches. To see if the kid really is recovering, or if it’s some fluke or side effect. To see if, without help, his chest will still and his heart will stop eventually.

Parts of him have made peace with it all, now. Maybe it’s the adrenaline wearing off and the hum of the benzos setting in fully --or resignation. There’s not much more he can do. The kit instructions had something written on them about calling the police, but Jesse had been on the money when he said ‘law don’t go around here’. There’s nobody for miles.

(And even if there were, how would it look on the report that this kid was found in his underwear, drugged to all hell by a man twenty years his senior? Jack would have a field day. )

No there’s nobody to call. The only thing left he can think to do is to --to move the kid. Doesn’t seem right to leave him to live or die on a cold, surly bathroom floor.

So Gabe kneels before the body again and scoops Jesse up. His body weighs almost nothing --and yet, the kid is heavy in his arms beyond belief, limp, his body damp with a sickly layer of sweat. Thin as a rail. It feels like some decidedly grim task as he passes over the threshold and into the bedroom, pausing at the side of the bed to lay him down. As he leans down to deposit Jesse’s body, he hears some noise of protest --and christ, it scares the life half out of him and stills his heart all at once.

There’s enough breath and volume to it that Gabe dares to feel himself smile, ever-so-slightly. What is it they saw about newborns and how their first cry is the most reassuring sign one can receive? He eases Jesse better onto the bed before he can drop him, turning him once more onto his side, casting some sheet over him. Shallowly, but there: the kid breathes.

He looks over Jesse’s face. Colour returning to it. A tentative sign of victory.

No less, after a few minutes, he retrieves the last syringe, almost to ease his paranoia. He holds onto it, instead of putting it down, as if that makes some difference.

Then, perching on the edge of the bed and looks out at the fresh night sky where the sun has just set. He thinks about Jack, again, unhelpfully, as he hand skirts Jesse’s wrist, pinching it slightly to feel the rate at which the kid’s heart beats. If he focuses, the sky is all the occurs to him, and Jesse’s pulse is all that he’s aware of.

Like that, he remains.

It isn’t clear how long he stays like that. It must be some substantial amount, because the sky darkens and skies appear to him and the neon of the ‘no vac’ sign registers to him vaguely. Is it an hour? Forty minutes? Jack might have started by now, and Gabe is nowhere near about to leave. His head feels heavy --peaceful, somehow. He takes off his shoes.

But the time passes nonetheless. Jesse’s heart rate climbs, and stabilises for a while. When it begins to dwindle, a little, he turns away from the window and back to the boy. He checks for breathing again --present, but stifled. He isn’t sure if it’s worth waiting until things get bad; out of nervousness, he pulls the sheets back and gives the kid another shot when his pulse drops below sixty.

Then it’s another matter of waiting. For Jess’s sake. Jack can wait, too.
Gabe climbs onto the bed besides Jesse, and lays over the sheets. He keeps his grip on Jesse’s wrist: and they rest in the bed like that. He won’t fall asleep; he can’t. He’ll just rest his eyes for a second. Just for a second.

The next thing he knows, his mouth is dry and he’s dazed to all hell, lying in a nearly pitch-dark room, warm as an oven. Disoriented, he lifts his head and tries to sit up, but feels himself snagged on something. It’s only then he even remembers Jesse.

Suddenly terrified, he traces the snag to a hand on his shirt: and traces that back to Jesse. Still in the bed, and after a moment of checking, still breathing. The kid has remained on his side, his breathing relatively normal, now, his fist tight into the fabric at the front of Gabe’s shirt. In the little catches of neon light from the ‘no vac’ sign that intermittently illuminate the room, he can see something of colour that has returned to the kid. Something of life.

Maybe that’s why Jesse’s hair shines with a layer of sweat, and why he feels like the bread made in Gabe’s mother’s kitchen when he reaches out to feel the kid’s face.

It’s impossible to say how long he’s been out. There’s no real come-down from benzos, besides a sort of fog in his cognizance. It occurs to him immediately that he might well have woken up to a corpse.

God, he’s never been one to question providence. Wouldn’t have the nerve to take his weird luck any other way: that Jesse’s face is before him in the dark, beautiful as it is, smeared with blood, shining with sweat. Warm with life. It’s evidence, but not evidence enough. It still doesn’t give any clue either way to the question stuck in the back of Gabe’s mind: did he jump, or was he pushed?

For a few minutes, he just looks at Jesse, and for that time, it is enough.

Maybe he drifts again. Time feels irrelevant. The room is still in twilight hushfulness and the desert is as calm and dark as the ocean floor. There are no dreams or recollections, there, for a while.

Not until he comes to once more, shocked by the feeling of the slightest touch on his neck, young skin over an old mark that has been sensitive since it’s delivery and always will remain so, even if it has faded considerably. He feels the touch and opens his eyes, and in the dark, sees nothing but two diamond-like glistening points of eyes looking at him curiously.

Jesse --Jesse, awake and breathing, feeling over the mark with a single fingertip in this tender, fascinated sort of way. When he feels Gabe react, his motions pause and his eyes flick up to the older man’s face. The sheets and Gabe’s clothes are all that separate their skin. A flash of neon outside illuminates the gaze Jesse gives him: mysterious in it’s desire.

Gabe can see the edges of the kid’s teeth when Jesse speaks. “I always wondered--...” His voice is small, and weathered. It feels like some hallucination to hear. Like this Jesse, here in the bed with him, tender and vulnerable, is some friendly apparition he’s conjured for his own sake and want. “Always wanted to know what it feels like.” Jesse’s voice is a whisper. A cracked vessel, heavier at the end, taking on water.

Gabe can hardly speak. His voice is abducted by the sight. By the dryness in his mouth that’s both heat and want, words stolen by the fog of creosote and sarsaparilla that shrouds them both.
“Did it hurt?” Jesse asks. His eyes are still glistening in the dark. The neon obscures any memory of their colour --and now, they look as if they contain multitudes of entire universes. His touch comes again, faintly, over a mark that matches Jack’s teeth perfectly, and how they’d come away with blood when he’d left it and it was all Gabe thought he would ever dream of for the rest of his life.

Gabe doesn’t know what to say. He swallows. He clamps one of his own hands over Jesse’s, looking over his face, seeing where the blood has dried around Jesse’s mouth in another buzz of neon light and how it looks different, now. “Let’s get one thing straight.” He manages to say, trying to dissuade the kid’s curiosity, but in the action merely holding Jesse’s hand to his neck. “I hate snoops.”

Jesse’s head tilts in the dark.

It isn’t clear who moves first. Maybe neither of them do. But like the inescapable pull of gravity, neon flashes again, and then they’re kissing.

Jesse’s mouth is hot and tastes a little bitter, but his lips are soft and he feels so willing and tender. His body is receptive to it, and Gabe can feel the way Jesse’s body curves into the motion, and how his hands cross the sheets as if to find their anchor, settling on Gabe, diminishing the distance and one of the two layers between them. The motion carries through him, and Gabe moves, too, a hand on Jesse’s hip, and the other on the back of his neck.

They kiss deeper. Gabe moves again, trailing from Jesse’s mouth down across his jaw and then to his neck, to press his nose there and inhale Jesse where he is sweetest and purest. God, the smell travels up his spine and to his hindbrain and he thinks of how Jesse smelt in heat and how gorgeous he looked. The feeling consumes him until he can feel his jaw opening as his teeth runs along where the scent is strongest, bold enough only to graze and to nip.

At that, Jesse whines. His neck straightens and his chin lifts to give Gabe more and wider access, whimpering all the while, his hands settling on the older man’s shoulders like it’s all that’s holding him up. He leans into it, too, as if desperate to be bitten, feverish and hot and sweet all over, just like Jack takes his coffee – seven shots of sugar straight to the brain, hold the milk, please.

It’s the last remnant of his good sense that keeps his jaw from clamping down on Jesse’s sweet flesh and marking him, despite the overwhelming thrum in the back of his head that knows how good and sweet and open Jesse is, malleable and gorgeous, worthy of his every affection. No, instead he moves away, trailing down the kid’s chest, tongue over a heart beating as quick as a rabbit’s, hand migrating away from the squeeze of Jesse’s hipbone to his pretty ass.

Jesse moves with him, breathless, whimpering out, trying to find Gabe’s own neck, mouthing over the sensitivity of old scar tissue to create new heat and warmth. All sharp teeth like Jesse was engineered to take him apart like this, as his hips move against Jesse’s body in the sheets, hungry for more. His hand squeeze’s Jesse’s ass and finds a suggestion of wetness there; and then all sense he has left leaves him in one fell swoop.

He hooks a greedy thumb in the back of the waistband and Jesse’s hips lift without instruction. His legs come in to bend and then there’s nothing between his skin and the air, dark and lithe, like some fever dream in the intermittent neon light. There’s slick catching on the inside of his thigh that shines in some of the light and Jesus Christ if Gabe’s mouth doesn’t water at that.

He doesn’t think to ask, too far gone to form words, moving himself further down the bed, strong hands on Jesse’s thighs, dragging the kid’s body to a better angle. As if born on a desert floor with
the deepest thirst, come to the sweetest shores to indulge it, he leans in without hesitation to taste Jesse.

And Jesse *whimpers*.

“Fuck.” He coughs out, in a stifled noise of pleasure as Gabe works his tongue across and then in, holding Jesse down by the tips of his fingers with one hand and skirting Jesse’s cock with the other, already hard with interest and leaking. He works one hand up the kid’s length and hears breathless stuttering of appreciation that only grows more wild as he enthusiasm does, dragging the wide flat of his tongue across Jesse’s hole just to taste him some more before delving in again, working him into relaxation, possessed by the taste.

Without the bitterness of the creosote, but nonetheless the same: dusty and smoky and intoxicating.

Above him, Jesse shifts his hips as if overstimulated --as if afraid to experience it. God knows the last time anybody bothered to taste him. To work him open so sweetly. It shows: the way Jesse stuffs the hell of his hand into his mouth as if he can barely handle it. His neck arches in the moonlight as he does: perfect and tantalising in it’s lack of marks.

It isn’t enough for long. He can practically feel Jesse’s pulse through his cock, it’s so hard (he’s not the only one) --and then he’s jerking his head suddenly to the side and hissing out, “G-gabriel --more.”

He says it so pretty too, wrecked and desperate, and maybe it’s some the lingering aftereffect of the benzos or the hiskey or the adrenaline, or maybe it’s just the way Jesse looks in the flickering, harsh light, but Gabe hardly even hesitates. He doesn’t think all of the sentence through. Doesn’t think of anything, in fact. He just moves.

Then he’s above Jesse, who remains on his back as he is, smelling so sweet, open and ready and pleading. There’s no time to undress, and Gabe has never been all that much for kissing, if he’s honest. He only operates as much as what’s left of his good thought will allow: he unbuttons the front of his jeans just enough and works his underwear further down his thighs as Jesse hooks his hands over his shoulders and noses at his neck again.

The light flickers again when Gabe draws up, closer, feeling the sweet, wet heat emanating from Jesse as he draws closer to his entrance. Holding himself there is torture, but it’s what he does as he finds Jesse’s eyes in the light. He stays at that threshold until the light dies again. Darkness envelops them both when Jesse is the one to move, shuffling his hips down and sinking onto Gabe’s cock.

As he does, Jesse becomes breathless again, gorgeously tight and warm, moving as deep as he can before he desists, rigid in the sheets with the sensation of it. His nails embed themselves in the comforting flesh of Gabe’s back. He moves again, backwards, as the flick flickers and catches sight of Jesse, flushed and breathless and looking half out of his mind. There’s barely any blood left on his face. Gabe doesn’t get to see much before darkness takes them again and he thrusts back in.

It goes right up his spine. Jesse feels as every bit as fantastic as he’d looked, tight and receptive: heaven in the way his slick clings. Gabe is moving again without even thinking about it --utterly riven by something he hasn’t felt in years. Some sensation Jack has never indulged: primal and finally free to satisfy itself by Jesse and the way his mouth is open and his eyes are closed and he’s making these little *ah-ah-ah* noises as he’s pounded into.

Jesse’s vitality is visible even in the dark. The bright spark of youth and the way he moves back...
against Gabe to wring as much pleasure from every second. The way he angles his own hips without asking until he’s crying out in earnest, the peace of his expression broken by ecstasy. He only lasts so long like that, and Gabe can feel him cum in the dark, covering the both of them, hot and quick and breathless.

There is no reprieve.

The moment he feels Gabe slow he reaches out in the dark and grasps onto gabe’s forearm suddenly, looking right up with those strange, encompassing eyes and pleading, “Gabriel.”

(And for a second, Gabe forgets where he is. For a second, he thinks it’s Jack, all of those years ago.)

But then the light flashes again and he sees Jesse looking desperate and sweet and then he moves faster and harder, chasing his own end, accompanied beautifully by Jesse’s staccato breaths. Old thoughts crawl out of his hindbrain: when he looks down he can see the impression of his cock at Jesse’s abdomen the sight is so obscene and illicit that he can feel his knot forming before he can even think the situation through.

Jesse must feel it to. Claws at him in the dark and begs for it, “Please.”

Gabe doesn’t have a shred of restraint left --not at the way Jesse’s back arches and he hisses out the moment he feels the knot at his entrance, thick and wide, stretching him with a low, warm burn that thrills him wildly. There’s a second of hesitation: of breath-catching --and then Gabe locks them both together as he cums, finally, breathlessly, feeling as if every cell in his brain is sounding off like july fireworks, rendered utterly brainless at how greedily tight Jesse is, and how the sensation of it alone has Jesse coughing out almost shyly, coming again, weaker but no less breathtaking.

It overtakes him, and then Jesse is limp in the sheets, breathing hard, his eyes fluttering to an almost-close as if he is too breathless and tired and fucked to possibly keep them open.

His neck elongates as his turns his head, illuminated by the light, and tempting --so tempting.

But then the neon stabilises for a few second, Gabe can spot dark, red patches on that column of skin where he’s been mouthing, and at that angle they look so much like the marks he’s seen carried by others that it only seems to occur to him, then. His eyes remain on them, and then he looks to Jesse’s face and they share a strange look.

There’s blood drying on his nose and his chin. His eyes are still bleary, and the sickly sheen of sweat makes the kid’s hair look ratty and unkempt. In this light he looks far less like poseidon. No, now Gabe can appreciate the lack of lines on his face, and the naivety there, and all of the scars that had warned him before.

He remembers the blood on Jesse’s thighs. The bite mark.

And the moment loses all of it’s sensuality.

Shrinking back, then, suddenly fearful of the kid in the sheets and of his own desire, he pulls out as Jesse leans forward, grasping at his arm again, surprising them both with the strength of his grip.

“Gabriel,” he murmurs, with this little half-smile. “What’re you--”
The offending hand is easy to remove. Too easy. Then Gabe is standing off of the bed, walking a few steps backwards for both of their sakes --so much the better, now no part or particle of them is touching. It clears his head. He feels worse for the clarity.

Even worse when he tucks himself hastily back into his underwear ad starts to do up his jeans again and Jesse is looking at him, wounded, perplexed, crawling forward on the bed. “Hey,” his voice is all soft like he thinks he can fix it. “Hey, there --there ain’t no hurry.” He comes forward and tries to reach out for Gabe again. “You can--”

The moment that he does, something flares in gabe, and he tears the hand off of him angrily. “Don’t touch me.” He says, sharply, like sudden thunder in an otherwise clear sky.

Jesse draws back like he’s terrified. Tries to master it into some bemused smile, cracking a nervous laugh. “Gabriel, what’s--”

“Don’t.” That stops the kid good in his tracks. The word requires no volume or exclamation. The warning in his tone says it all, even with the slight tremble to it. He knows, now, that the lines are drawn and the plans are only a week away. That he can never come back here again as a civilian. He can never come back here again for Jesse. Not after this.

He stuffs his hand into his back pocket and takes out a roll of notes. He doesn’t know how much there is there. Five-hundred, maybe six-hundred dollars? It doesn’t matter, now. He throws it to Jesse carelessly.

The kid feels over it and looks up as if he’s lost to the world. Gabe starts to put on his shoes. He needs to get out of here. He needs to get out of here now.

Then Jesse’s standing. Holding out the notes. “What’s this?”

Gabe won’t look at him. “Take it.” He says. “I don’t wanna see you here again. Ever again.” He turns to look at Jesse to make sure his words reach the kid. “D’you understand me?”

Jesse’s mouth is open slightly. “Gabriel, I don’t--”

“Do you understand me or not?!?” Then he’s shouting. Really, in earnest, yelling at the poor sonvuabitch because he’s furious, and only at himself. “Take it and get to Mexico.” His voice grows even harder. Pleading, in it’s own way. “Do you understand me?”

Jesse looks at him, lost. His expression turns from hopeless to scowling. He throws the roll down angrily, and wipes at his nose. “I don’t want your damn charity.” He hisses, as Gabe collects the notes from the floor. “I wanna know what’s --what’s goin’ on? Why’re you--”

Gabe advances on him, then, and the action has Jesse backtrack until his calves are touching the mattress and he looks white as a sheet. He grabs one of Jesse’s hands and forces the money into it. “For the service.” He says, quietly. Hating every word of it. “Most of your men usually pay after, don’t they?”

Jesse tries to tug his hand away, but he’s weak as a kitten, and then all he has left are these terrible, tragic eyes that glisten with some form of hate or hurt when he looks back up at Gabe. “Fuck you.” He croaks, barely able to keep eye contact.

The notes are still being pressed into his hand. Gabe folds his fingers around them, holding Jesse’s
hand into a fist like that for a few seconds while they look at each other. He doesn’t let go until he
sees resignation in Jesse’s eyes. Misery.

Then, barely above a whisper, he asks, “Do you understand?”

Jesse doesn’t even speak.

Merely nods, and that’s all there is to say about it.

Then Gabe is walking out of the room and down the hall and out of the building into the air of
parting darkness. Day will break, soon, but there is barely any light in the sky, and no matter how
fast he does or how much distance he puts between the both of them, he can still smell creosote and
sarsaparilla on his skin —beneath it, in his blood. He can still feel hot flashes on neon on his back like
all of the light in the world knows his every sin.

Maybe he runs into town to call for transport. Trying to outrun the shame of it. The humiliation.

But that’s meaningless to Jesse, now.

The journey back is too quiet. All he can think of is Jack, in the worst and best ways. How the name
floods his system with adrenaline, and a love that’s made fearful of Jack’s invincible winter. What
could Gabe say? What reason could he give? He hopes that it’s mouth will learn to seal itself shut.
Or that the ice around his lover might cool and drift away somehow: that Jack might kiss him with
enough force that Jesse’s name and this night will never be able to creep back up his throat again.

They touch back onto base between five and six. Gabe doesn’t look at a clock. Couldn’t bear to gaze
at any face. He has backlogged messages —mostly generic, some forwarded as Jack has him comm
set to urgent only during night hours, mostly from Ana, but some from angel and the like, with the
most dangerous name in the world in the subject margin: Jack. The word is now so painful to read in
it’s intimacy and familiarity. In how it’s native to Gabe’s tongue.

His heartbeat used to sound like that name.

The first thing he does is shower. Takes an empty communal one and sits on the floor, letting the
spray wash over him. Maybe it will not erase the night and merely Jesse’s scent, no matter how badly
he wants it gone. No matter how surreal he feels in it. The last remnants of the kid gone. He knows,
as he dries, that he’d die if he saw Jesse’s face again.

But he’d die if he didn’t, too.

He goes by his office to take some of the pills in his top drawer, and finds fresh paperwork. A folder
marked with a name on it that isn’t his.

It’s the only thing in the world that could drag him to the door marked ‘Strike Commander’. The
only thing that does.

This time, he gets the code right on the first try. Stands outside there long enough in the dark of the
hall that it’s hardly an achievement. Entering is the hardest part.

Pine and wintergreen. January frost. It is like he is being welcome home after years of war. War of
his own making. Of his own design and distraction. God, he can hardly stir a foot. He can hardly
bring himself to get closer to his mate. The folder in his hands is a welcome distraction.
He does, however. He crosses the room in silence, pausing before the bed, his eyes adjusting to the light enough to make out the shape of Jack as he is: asleep. On his left side, like always, arms drawn in, quiet, and at peace. It’s often the only peace he gets. How fitting it seems that Gabe should be the one to disturb it as he comes around to perch on the empty side of the mattress.

It takes him what feels like many hours to reach a hand out. To just touch Jack.

He is warm and familiar and inviting. Not in a primal or base way, like when the scent of heat radiates from him and Gabe feels irrevocably drawn. More centered: guided immediately by it. The star to his wandering bark. Touching Jack is almost enough. Until it isn’t. And then the hand on Jack’s shoulder moves. He shakes his mate gently.

Jack makes some noise of protest. His expression turns from blank to sour. He turns away. Always did have a rigid body clock. Something more powerful is clearly needed to rouse him hours before he should be waking. Gabe knows that. The knowledge of it registers to him as suddenly painful and wonderful, all at once.

He shakes his mate again, firmer than before, but still gently. “Jack.” He murmurs. “Jack, wake up.”

There’s another noise of protest. It takes a few seconds before Jack opens his eyes and finds Gabe in the room. They flick to the clock, irritably.

Blinking sleepily, Jack remains on his side. He shuts his eyes again and mumbles, “It’s not even six.”

Gabe aches to touch him again. But doesn’t: as if the right has been revoked. “I know.” He says, before moving a hand to the folder in his lap. “This came for you.” He places it by Jack’s chest and draws back, in wait. It’s not met with much enthusiasm.

“Can’t this wait?” Jack murmurs again. His voice is low and gorgeous. Gabe wants to feel it between his lungs, but he fears they are still full of Jesse’s air. When there’s no reply, Jack huffs out some small noise of irritation and slides to a lazy sitting position, reaching over on the night stand to find his glasses and turn on a very low, dim light to his right.

He takes the folder and opens it up. His eyes walk over the words on the page, until they don’t. Stopped. Stuck on some word.

Then he reads it again. Closes it: reads the front.

He looks at Gabe and then away. His jaw clenchers.

“Is this real?”

His tone in those three tiny words is indescribable. Infinite: a naked singularity under the near-blackness of this cosmos, captured by Gabe’s unworthy eyes. It contains every emotion he thinks he might have ever seen: all of the love and loathing and squalor and passion. It is beautiful in all the ways it is truly frightening.

Gabe feels himself nod. “It’s real.” He hears himself murmurs.

Then they are looking at each other. They are looking wholly at one another, and he smiles, despite it
all.

“Jack,” He says, breathlessly. “You’re pregnant.”
welp. it's here! idk abt y'all but i miss jesse already. warning for probably like a billion typos.

Jack’s mouth opens. Then closes.

The words he’s searching for seem to escape him. They remain in silence.

Jack’s face looks white and strange. Vaguely haunted. Isn’t he supposed to be smiling? Laughing? Talking, at all..?

He leans back on his traitorous hands. He swallows. Maybe it’s that Jack hasn’t heard. That he’s still woken up to it. That he can’t read Angela’s handwriting in the note affixed with a paperclip, so he opens his mouth and speaks again.

“Five weeks.” He says. Hates the words come from his mouth. That they couldn’t have come a day earlier. This is never how he wanted to find out. It’s never how he wanted things to go, but nonetheless, Jesse will be in Mexico soon, forgotten and distant, and Jack is here, now, in their bed, with life growing inside of him. “The bloodwork is timestamped just before midnight.”

Jack’s eyes are downcast at the folder again before they close. Can he smell the deception on Gabe? The ailing in his eyes, or the creosote soaking in his blood? The quiet twitches like fire: unnatural and oppressive, smothering Gabe’s every hope and magnifying his ever paranoia until it swells like some dark wave: an enhanced and peculiar disquiet.

It’s so awful that Gabe is talking again before he can help himself. Sick with fear. Terrified of himself. “Jack.” He tries. “Did you --did you hear me?”

He watches with distant sickness as Jack’s head nods itself in some tight-hinge-like movement. The words have reached him. He knows.

(How much does he know, though?)

Wasn’t this always supposed to be different? The other way around, at least? With Jack as the one breaching the threshold of the bed with the news, his voice hitching and breathless like when he can never quite believe something. His face nervous with a smile that only just lets itself be: his joy visible but as delicate as a flower stem.

This is a million miles from that. Jack, blinded-sided. Silent in the sheets. Face frozen and unreadable. Jesse’s air still wedged between Gabe’s lungs like slander.

His weight on the bed feels too-heavy in the hand he’s leaning on. It brings Jack closer to him, incrementally, and the silence indicates that neither of them are ready to minimise the careful distance between them.
No, instead, Gabe hears himself swallow as he repeats himself. “You’re pregnant, Jack.” He says, again. As if they’re the magic words -- *sim sala bim*! And then Jack will be just as he used to be: just like he is in Gabe’s imaginings.

Nothing happens. Nothing happens, and then he’s forced to tolerate the silence for as long as he can before he breaks down, his head dipping, guilt welling at the back of his throat as he whispers, “Jack, say something.”

Jack’s eyes flutter. They open. They don’t look up. He’s even quieter to huff out a bloodless laugh. “Something.”

Then, with hesitation, he manages to find Gabe in the dim of the room. His hands are shaking when he takes off his glasses. All of him is: fragile, suddenly. Brittle as a mayfly caught on the breeze.

Jesus, Gabe has never wanted to hold him more.

Without rank; without politics or power or reason. He wants to hold his omega. To protect him. To be together: friends, lovers. Mates. The mark on his neck burns with some deep regret that could be longing.

But it’s most likely remorse.

Eventually, the silence breaks, as it’s won’t to do. But never in the way Gabe expects. Jack has never been that easy to predict: a prize that changes hands.

Jack’s head lifts. His jaw is still every bit as tight and high as it was before. “Deadlock.” He says.

Oh, Christ. Crucified Christ, he knows.

“Jack--”

“How long, until the sting?” He swallows. He looks up at Gabe with this strange gravity. Pulling every aspect of his life closer to him with sheer magnitude alone.

Gabe can hardly speak. Is he off the hook? Safe, for now? The truth is still boiling in his blood, and if Jack’s edges are sharp enough to cut, it will all be over. The scent of creosote and sarsaparilla will betray him. There’s nothing left but to gamble: but to speak.

“A week.” He murmurs, looking at some corner of the room. “Maybe --maybe more.”

Silence, again. He thinks it will descend like some terrible and haunting fog until he watches Jack’s eyes drop and then --smile. Of all things, finally: his head drops and he smiles and makes some noise of disbelief like the words have finally gotten into his bones. Everything he ever wanted --for all of these years.

His, at last.

Breaking, then, laughing breathlessly, Jack shakes his head. “Jesus.” He murmurs. “Jesus, Gabe.”

The distance seems to decrease. Something in the air changes --in Jack’s posture. He looks more tender in the dim light. Gabe still aches to hold him. Makes a move to cross the expanse of bed and is
permitted in the movement as Jack lifts his hand. Touches the space of his lower stomach almost fearfully.

Their eyes meet, for what might be the first time in the conversation. In this light Jack looks like he might be infinite. Bluer than the beautiful waters of nauset and big as a frisco seal. Eyes shining full of God. His head dips again and then Jack’s head is on his neck. Ghosting over where’s Jesse mouth prowled, nosing into Gabe’s scent longingly.

Gabe stiffens to feel it. Wonders if there are any marks on his neck, but even if there are, the light is low and Jack won’t find them because he isn’t looking. Doesn’t realise he’s holding his breath until he feels Jack’s on his neck again.

“Say something.” He whispers, with a trembling edge of uncertainty.

Gabe relaxes, even slightly. He thinks of the words on the paper. The words out of his mouth. The truth, if he dares call it that. “Something.” His mouth is dry in apprehension. Words become unreachable, abstract concepts to him. He has to borrow old ones to even say something. “We, uh--” Slight, distant laughter creeps up his throat. “We square?”

That seems to confuse Jack, as if it were every bit as unexpected as the deadlock quip. Gabe doesn’t believe his own ears at the words: that he can find the nerve to say it after the events of tonight. Why wouldn’t they be square? All of his rage and lust is out of his system. Purged on the spurned boy who should be gone, soon, --from his mind and the desert sun.

Something else is gone, too. The cold around Jack. His eternal winter parting, even but an inch, for him to consider the words he’s heard, and speak softly. “I’d --I’d like to be.”

Like to be square, or more? Partners, again? Friends? God, Gabe can hardly recall how the time used to pass. How in their quiet moments, he was content to knit or read or do nothing in particular --and somehow doing nothing was somehow something when it was something with Jack. Everything was a little more colourful. The fresh frost of pine and wintergreen made the air every bit as crisp and clear as Gabe’s city lungs could handle.

Now, he’s holding his breath. Sitting nervously at the silence and sitting on his hands (and their needs). “I’d kill to hear what you’re thinking.”

Jack’s head lifts, slightly. “What I’m thinking?” His voice is hard with slight nerves. He swallows. “I --I didn’t even think I could be--...” his head shakes again. “Feel like it doesn’t--” He sniffs sharply. “I don’t think it’s sunk in yet.” Then his head is turning and he looks almost frightened when he stares up at Gabe, like something out of his mouth could sacrifice this moment.

It couldn’t. After all these years, there’s only only thing that could take this moment away, and christ, right now Jesse might as well be a million miles away.

“You want me to say it again?” Gabe asks. He manages to move his hands at long last, and maybe he’s shaking too when he traces the perfect curve of Jack’s spine in the dim light. “Think that’ll help it settle in?”

The remark catches Jack off-guard enough to laugh. It sounds golden. Then he’s nodding. Pressing himself into Gabe again. “It might.” he smiles.

“Alright.” Gabe says. It doesn’t feel real to him either, like some rumour of another set of people. Of
diverging roads and different lives. He feels overly-audacious to taste it in his mouth. “You’re five weeks, Jack.”

Jack huffs out another breath. Closes his eyes. “I still can’t -- I can’t imagine it.” his hand scrapes down his jaw against the grain of his stubble. “I could -- I could organise the handover to Ana after this Deadlock business.” His mind is already turning. He looks gorgeously pensive. Hopeful, too. “Could bow out on a win, and then--...”

The thought trails off, unfinished out loud. But they both know this song by rote -- after all, they were the ones writing it, years ago. Bow out on a win, and then a few, quiet years would be theirs. Somewhere secure to raise their children. Somewhere beautiful. He thinks of the colourful streets of Mexico. The clear bear of Vienna.

Just as if they had planned it: only with some details in reverse. They spoke about it once or twice during the crisis. Alone in the wreckage, Jack had bought it up. Had said that Gabe could step down from Strike Commander when the time was right. That, if they lived at all, they could find some beautiful and quiet patch of earth for their family.

At the time, it had been hard to hear. Gabe couldn’t think past his next firefight, and then Jack said something dumb like ‘it was the end of the world, so he might as well play out a few what ifs’. Man of war, dreaming of peacetime in the darkest hour. That was his Mexico.

Gabe never did make Strike Commander. The world turned.

And here he is, again, in some sort of wreckage, recalling it at the same time Jack does, their bodies pressed together while they remain so distinct and separate.

They’re quiet, for a while, still in the hushfulness of it all.

“I never thought it’d happen like this.” Jack says, eventually. A little less starstruck.

“How’d you mean?” Gabe feels up his spine with the tips of his fingers. Tries not to say ‘I wish it hadn’t happened like this’. Succeeds, somehow.

The weight of Jack against him makes it easier. How vulnerable he’s willing to be. As if this is all they ever needed -- for something to give. For some desire to be met to unify them again. Maybe they’ve become strangers, but at least now, they’ll be strangers in a town they recognise. In a place they want to be.

“I thought,” Jack murmurs, and then his thought dissipates. “I don’t know. That we’d be less -- lonely.”

“Everybody gets like that.” Gabe says, sharply, before he realises that the words are general. They’re no indictment of his sins, but of the span of years where things have been vacant and strained. Where distance has bloomed between both of them. Jack works. Gabe works. Their bed is large enough that they don’t have to touch. They only share it out of ritual, most times.

It hasn’t always been that way.

He’s thinking back to the Jack he used to know when he’s blindsided again by a simple question. “Do you want this?”
Gabe can hardly speak. “What?”

Jack looks at him, almost dully. Practically. Ever-defensive, he is, unwilling to allow himself the thrill of excitement just yet. He’s scared that he’ll be alone in it. That it will be taken away. So much else has been taken. Gabe knows the fear.

“So you want this?” Jack repeats himself. Follows on the statement before Gabe can have a shot at interjecting. “We’re not --not rookies anymore. I mean, the pills? Whatever the hell is going on in New Mexico? I’m not--” Jack throws his hands up. “I’m not willing to tiptoe around that bullshit. Not--...not now there’s--”

Gabe doesn’t need to hear anymore. “I want this.” He says, stopping Jack in the middle of his sentence. Almost laughing to see his mate like this: Jack could get everything he ever wanted and still find a reason to be cautious --like he only ever opens his mouth in preparation to lick whatever wounds he might incur.

It makes him a good Strike Commander. (It will make him a wonderful parent.)

And it’s so typical that Gabe’s mouth is open and twisted into some smile before he can help himself. “Jesus, Jack.” he says. “You wouldn’t tiptoe around it --I wouldn’t ask you to. I never did.” He huffs out a breath as he shakes his head. “Jack.” his head tilts; his voice low, but softer. “You’re going to be a great father.”

Jack’s mouth opens and closes again. His own head tilts, and for a second it looks like pain is welling in his eyes.

Not pain. He’s just overwhelmed, that’s all. The words are enough to undo him, for once, and instead of caution and distance and old arguments, Jack is letting out some trembling laugh with his eyes closed, unable to face the world just yet. Trying to hold onto the words, and the moment. Gabe moves his arms to hold his mate, and lets him be.

Talks and presses no further until jack can muster it. Some time later, in this reedy whisper of a voice.

“You think so?” Jack asks.

Gabe nods without thinking. “You know I do.” It’s all that needs be said. To still Jack’s heart. To tide them over to the new, and uncertain, where in this bed they touch. The words come out as steady as a bridge over troubled waters.

They maneuver in the sheets. Gabe doesn’t realize how exhausted he is until he settles down onto his back, and realizes that his only rest has been stolen moments between checking for Jesse’s breathing. There had been no peace on the transport over here. It’s been the longest day of his waking life, he thinks. He’s due the rest.

If Jack thinks something of it, he doesn’t say. He lays with Gabe, leaning heavy on his mate’s arm. Jack’s back is to Gabe and he keeps him there by the weight of his body. Gabe doesn’t mind an inch.

At the right angle, he can catch Jack’s scent and he drifts off to it. The sharp and familiar frost of home, only, it smells richer to him, now. Dearer. It’s the closest they’ve been in years. At least, by standards of intimacy. Jesse is nowhere in his mind, and thus, the moment remains unsullied: one to treasure, that his ghost will drag itself back to in darker times.
They sleep like that. Jack, on his side as he always is.

Only, with an elbow caught on his hip, and some tentative, dreaming hand, that gravitates to his stomach.

-

Ana is, as she was always going to be, the first to be told.

Jack barely waits a day.

In all of his infinite wisdom and caution, he sees fit to say it. Aloud. To another person.

Gabe isn’t normally superstitious. And it’s not as straightforward as superstition. It’s a mix of things. That Ana knows he’s been spending so much time in New Mexico is one fear. The other is gabe’s deep and true belief that, when celebrating a win, the universe is usually pretty quick to get even.

And Jesus, this is all Jack has ever wanted.

He tells Ana even before he has had a chance to discuss his bloodwork with any of the medical staff, or get a referral to an obstetrician, and gabe only enjoys this knowledge when he’s caught off-guard by her in the rosy hours of the evening as he goes over the strategy for the Deadlock operation once more.

Ana’s always good at keeping herself from being too well-known. Her voice is what startles him, as she seems to appear in the door.

“I suppose a congratulations is in order.” She says, and Gabe masks his surprise enough to find her with a calm and fortified expression. The only reason he knows, right away, that she’s talking about Jack is because he can’t for a moment stop thinking about it. He prepares himself for her delivery: the way she’s always been good at twisting it to make him look the villain.

“Now, now.” he says, giving her a sharp look before turning back to his itinerary. “Only say it if you mean it.”

Ana’s a sharp girl. That doesn’t phase her.

“How awkward, then.” She says, with some mirth to her voice, taking two steps into the room and dragging her late spring shadow behind her. “I did already congratulate Jack, after all.”

He shakes his head in a small movement. It’s a strange game to play, but it always has been. ana was fast friends with Jack. Wary of an alpha, the same cannot be said for her and Gabe. So he feels no particular remorse to give her just as good as he’s receiving.

“You really can’t manage another?” He rolls his eyes. “Or is it that you need me to explain to you how I was involved in the process of getting Jack pr—”

“Thank-you, Gabriel.” She cuts him off easily. Looks over him like a hawk. Sees too much. “I did mean to come by to congratulate you, though.”

Oh, that’s bait if ever he’s seen it. Gabe nearly looks up. Nearly raises his eyebrows, before he
masters it.

“Is that a fact?” he asks, trying to sound as bland as possible.

She makes a noise of amusement. “That’s a fact.” Coming inside of the room a little more, ana’s hands come up to cross over her chest. She’s always standing like that. Gabe has joked before (bitterly) that he often doesn’t know if Ana is Jack’s second-in-commander of bodyguard. “I’m sure you know how much this means to him.”

‘More than you do’, Gabe thinks about saying, before biting the inside of his cheek and getting the better of himself. “How much it means to both of us.” he says, instead, looking up to find her face.

As ever, she’s not on the backfoot. “Both of you. Of course.” her hands fold. She paces a few steps. Warning signs. “I know you were trying as much as possible, why is why you touched down at five-seventeen this morning when you were anticipating his heat.”

There it is. The accusation. Gabe is annoyed by it instinctively before he realises that, truly, he has no place being hurt, here. She’s right in that while Jack might have been burning up on snowy sheets, in desperate need of union, Gabe was vacant at his post, deep within Jesse as if he had forgotten the other man’s name, or cared not for their old desires.

His mouth opens and shuts. He turns back to the itinerary. “There was a situation that required my attention.”

Ana snorts in derision. “Let me guess.” She says, “A confidential situation.”

He thinks about Jesse’s body on that bathroom floor. About the way it had felt to breathe for another human being.


She takes another few steps across the room. Wades in the silence. It’s a power move. “Did this situation somehow manifest after our conversation, or were you just lying to me for simplicity’s sake?” Sharp, as ever. Cutting. “Nine hours. All the while--”

“I’m aware of the situation!” Then he’s shouting. Like some admission of guilt is in coming to his own defense. God, Gabe’s a lot of things, but he isn’t blind. He knows how it looks. But he also knows how it is, too. When his voice is a bit more level, he tries to take the reigns again. Tries to recover some of his dignity. “Deadlock are going to be dealt with by the end of next week. I’m just making sure we do the job right.” Ana makes that noise of disbelief again. It gets under his skin, as it’s won’t to do. “If you’re going to make an accusation, by all means, do.”

Ana won’t be goaded so easily. Tricks like that won’t work, and neither will laws of silence. Her tongue clicks. She considers her moves more carefully. “I’m not making any accusations. I just hope for your sake that you’re being honest.”

“For my sake?” His attentions are far from the itinerary now. Too late to pretend he has any semblance of control over the conversation. “Your consideration is, as always, much appreciated, but I--”

The arms across her chest seem to tighten. “Spare me.” She says, tightly. “I know how much time you’ve spent boots-on-the-ground in New Mexico. What is it out there you’re caught up in? Drugs?
Sex? Honestly, I couldn’t care less.” Her mouth sits in a tight, hard line when she isn’t speaking. “You can do what you want with your time and assets. But if this comes back to hurt this organisation --or Jack, Allah forgive me, Gabriel--”

“Jack’s a big boy.” he says, hotly. Trying not to examine what it is she’s actually saying. To hurt Jack would be bad enough, but to hurt him, now--... “He can deal with me himself. Has been for years, in fact.” Gabe maximises another slide as if to prove a point. “Hell, he can even sit, or stay, or roll over if you have any damn treats.”

He sits up a little more like it will make any damn difference. “More to the point, I’d love to know where you’ve got this idea that I’m out to get him. ‘Cause, Jesus, after twenty years, I’ve sure been taking my sweet time.”

Ana’s quiet, at that. He has his own suspicions already formed about the rift between them. About her worries for Jack. Alpha --that’s what she sees when she looks at him. A threat. An interloper.

(Or maybe she can see the red dust of the desert on him. Maybe they find themselves so often at eachother’s throats because they see eachother for exactly what they are. Jerk. Hypocrite.)

Having lost some of her momentum, ever-so-slightly, Ana’s footsteps draw back towards the door. “Congratulations again, Gabriel.” She says, almost as a warning. “I’ll see you in New Mexico.”

“You too.” he says, if only to get the last word.

He doesn’t feel any the better for it.

And somewhere out in the desert, Jesse is loading his gun.

-

In a way, it gets easier.

In other ways? Not so much.

The incident with Jesse becomes less fresh, and even if it has stopped haunting him in every waking moment, he’s still thinking about it every couple of minutes. It coincides with the other constants: the thought landing in his mind the same time the thought of jack does, or the sting, and then it’s a mess of quiet regret and a strange, intangible hope.

Plans continue to come together. Jack gets his referral. Goes alone --and Gabe mostly pretends not to mind. How can he have the right to mind about anything, anymore? Even if that weren’t the case, he knows, the ice is thin because it’s only just formed; Jack’s pregnancy hasn’t fixed these last few years.

But it’s done something.

It’s not so easy to tell what that might be, at first. He can feel Jack in bed at night, now: permitted in the action of crawling further onto the mattress pad until they’re touching. The day keeps them apart until the evening, permitting incidents where they pass in a corridor and Jack nods to him, openly, his eyes betraying his auspicion despite how green he looks. How all the sugar in the world can’t make his decaf any more effective.
Three night after they find out, he finds Jack asleep at his desk and lets him be.

The next night, he doesn’t. The waking is gentle. Jack doesn’t put up any real resistance. Christ, he must be really tired.

Aren’t they all? It’s a long week. The air is drying up as summer fast approaches. The tense, storm-ready atmosphere is holding it’s breath in anticipation of what the next week will hold. Deadlock has been a black mark on too many maps for far too long, and they’ll all live a lot longer and sleep a lot easier with this over.

Right now, though, he can’t bring himself to sleep with so much to be done. There’s no sense lying there with his eyes open when he could be going over details and shuffling operative lists in that way that seems to comfort him. So he talks Jack out of his office and that’s how they spend the evening: with Jack sleeping (on his side, as always) with his mate sat up besides him, flicking through different screens to try and visualise all of the information he has.

One of his old tabs opens at some point: details of Mexico, and some saturated picture of a colourful street during a festival. He swears he sees Jesse in the crowd. Hallucinates him at the backs of other dark-haired men.

Jack stirs besides him.

He closes the window. Purges it from his history. Tries to ignore the faint dissonance he feels in himself at the thought of Jesse existing in the same room as Jack. He turns his attentions back to an old report of a Deadlock operation. Jack wakes nonetheless.

“What time is it?” he asks, with a yawn, moving minimally as if not invested in the idea of waking.

Gabe scans the top corner of his most prominent slide. “Just gone eight.” He says, impassively.

“Thought you’d be out the rest of the night.” He watches out of the corner of his eye as Jack wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and sits up.

“Think I could be.” Jack murmurs. Makes a move to pull himself to the edge of the bed but doesn’t make it. He leans his face in his hands drowsily. “Fuck it. Ana can take tomorrow morning. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

Never does make it to the end of the bed. Gives up where he is and retires back to lying on his side. It’s uncharacteristic of jack to be laissez-faire about his work, much less lazy. He must be genuinely suffering. Gabe tries to make light of it.

“Careful, now.” he says. “They’ll have you for dereliction of duty.” He shakes his head. “Or maybe just Amari.”

“The hell she will.” Jack mumbles. It sounds muffled --maybe by a sheet or a hand. When Gabe does look down at him, he still looks a little sickly. A touch too pale. He was under the impression that Jack was supposed to be glowing. “Think she might be the only person that’s got any real sympathy for me right now.”

Gabe’s brow furrows. “What?”

Impatiently, but not unkindly, Jack sighs. “She’s the only one that’s done this before.” he yawns again, and turns a little to get a better look at Gabe. It only occurs to him then to be sympathetic. It’s
a hesitant thing to try out. He never took naturally to it and still doesn’t: awkwardly trying to hug the line between distant and condescending when he speaks.

“She tell you you’re looking a little green?”

Jack raises his eyebrows lovelessly. “Charming.” he says, but remains smiling in his eyes all the same. “She was a little more tactful.” Then he looks away almost bashfully, suddenly childlike in his usually mastered expression. “But it’s, uh --she says it’s normal.”

“Morning sickness?” Gabe has to think for a second about the words. There’ll be time to prepare and involve himself in this when they’re better, again. More comfortable. When they’ve stepped away from playing at world police for five minutes. Jack doesn’t seem to mind.

“And afternoon.” He says, blandly. “And evening.” Shaking his head, he smiles in half-earnest. “Think I gagged on a piece of toast yesterday. It was like being back in the damn program.”

They never really talk about the SEP. Less said the better, really. Jack never did look good with vomit drying in the corner of his mouth.

“Jesus.” Gabe says, mildly, reaching a hand down to brush against Jack’s in some cavalier, almost accidental movement. “When was the last time you got something down you?”

Jack shifts again, like he’s restless, or uncomfortable. “This morning.” he says, noncommittally.

Gabe just cants his head. Has to bite the inside of his cheek from saying ‘Jesus’ again. Has to pick his words carefully so it doesn't sound like a lecture. “That’s probably why you’re so damn tired.” He settles on. “Want me to get you something from the--”

Waving a hand, Jack protests. “That sounds like a threat right now.” he huffs out a weak laugh. “It’s--it’s fine. I just want to get some rest.”

Already feeling a nuisance, Gabe draws his knees in awkwardly without really thinking about it. “Alright.” he says, quietly, a little absently, watching Jack shuffle back onto his side, like always, his eyes coming to be closed. The elbow resting on his hip as his hand extends limply. Only his fingertips grace the flat plane of his stomach.

His mind winds to the intermittent flickering of the ‘no vac’ sign of Jesse’s motel, and how he’ll have to face it again in just four days time. There’s a tall, red rock face behind that building that looms over the building. Gabe thinks that it’s the edge of the universe.

His own hand moves towards Jacks. Indulges in it, if shyly. There’s no difference there, yet. That doesn’t really matter.

He feels Jack’s fingers move against his like he’s just feeling him there.

“Doesn’t feel real yet.” he mumbles, into the sheets, without opening his eyes. “Does it?”

Gabe almost doesn’t know what Jack’s asking about, at first: the sting and Jesse, or the baby. Either way, the answer is the same.

“Not even slightly.”
It makes them both smile.

The drawers are all empty, now.

The bathroom, raided. Everything Jesse owns is either on his back or in the bag on the bed.

He doesn’t mind the scarcity. There’s maybe a thousand dollars stuffed in the front. That’s all that matters. All that will matter.

Even so, the dreamcatcher is stuffed in the back of the bag, as well, like it will mean anything from this place, or be of any use in Mexico. These things he knows, and yet, still, he can’t bear to part with it. It’s foolish, really. Childish. But it’s his.

He keeps the loaded gun on the bed. That’s for the best. With the way he keeps turning it over in his damn hands, familiar with the cool, heavy weight of it, he’s half-scared he’ll have to use it again. The shooting he doesn’t so much mind. Never did. It’s how easy it came to him. How, after the shot rings out, he always gets a terrible thrill to do it again.

A relic from the old days. Johnny never did much like that he kept it. Wasn’t a ‘fitting habit or piece of property for someone of Jesse’s designation’. Johnny never did take it away, though.

He thinks about it as he finishes the can of peaches in the dark. The room is familiar to him, but still, and unnaturally cold. The sound of the fork on the wet, corrugated parts of the tin irritate his ears. But the peaches are sweet, all the same. They temper his fear, ever-so-slightly. Like nothing so terribly bad could happen so long as there are cans of peaches left in this world.

When he’s finished with them, he feels all of his luck has run out.

And there’s nought to do but face the world, or run from it.

So he stands up and gets the straps of the bag over his shoulders. He takes a conspiratorial look out of the window. The sky is wide open and oppressively dark. There will be nobody roaming at this hour. That should make it easier.

Jesse gives the room another desperate look-around. He wishes there were something tying him here. To this safe, familiar scrap of the universe where he was a name and a roof over his head and a home. But there’s nothing. Nothing at all, so he knows it’s time.

He straightens his back and goes to the door.

He stops two paces short and turns back around.

The gun on the bed is still loaded, lying there. It winks coyly at him, reflecting starlight, looking so innocuous and peaceful. Jesse’s fingers twitch. To take it means protection, he knows. But he also knows that every shot from it condemns him to this life. It’s a part of him, now: and a bad one. But it seems reckless --foolish, almost, to leave it lying there, inviting trouble.

For there are parts you keep. Parts you change, or cover up, or throw away.

That’s foundational in survival.
But when Jesse goes to the door again and something feels dissonant and wrong enough to drive him back to the bed to pick up the gun; he can’t help but be honest.

He knows who he is. So he takes it.

And he walks.
im officially a graduate. pop a bottle with me. this one is for avery.

remember how no good deed goes unpunished?

lookit this awesome spare parts playlist by the greatest human being on the planet! http://northern-mongrel.tumblr.com/post/161956350590/listen-read-playlist-for-spare-parts-by-the

That night, two different men are visited by the same monster.

Inevitability.

It came for Jesse first. As quick and merciless as death.

It finds him here --with tears in his boiling eyes, naked and afraid, stripped of his dignity and pride in anger. Men hold him down so that his back is on the hard woodgrain of the bar: some at his legs: one at his right shoulder as another holds his left out for them to work with. Four of them and one of him.

Yet still, Jesse is fighting. Bucking his hips and thrashing wild as a live wire.

He tries to cry out, too, the sound muffled by the whiskey-soaked gag that burns in his mouth. It halts his screams: the passage of his fear, and instead he inhales the burn of the alcohol as he takes in terrified, knifelike breaths, choking and spluttering, looking around uselessly for some help.

He is barely audible above the malevolent buzz of the needle, working ink into skin. Marking him as property.

The flesh of his arm is burning. The needle must catch on some nerve or cut him deep or something worse because it flares all the suddenly and Jesse’s head throws itself back and cracks hard against the bar beneath him. It consumes him until it’s all he can feel. Enough that his eyes squeeze shut -- enough that he goes taught as a bowstring as tears break down his face at last.

The sensation continues. A jagged spike of pain curls down his spine and he cries out again, flinching so hard and suddenly that he manages to free his left arm, ever-so-slightly and ever-momentarily before hands come like tombstones to bury him again.

“Hold him still!” Blearily, distantly, he heard somebody hiss. A woman’s voice: a friend’s voice. “It needs to be clean.”

Another voice interjects. He doesn’t look to who. “Give him another drink.”

Jesse recognises those words. Enough to open his eyes and shake his head profusely. ‘No more’, he tries to say, to no avail, the panic rising in him again. ‘Please, don’t’.
But it’s too late when another pair of hands fix themselves on his head to tilt his chin towards his chest. Somebody comes closer with a bottle. He jerks his face to the right to escape the taste, and cold whiskey thrills on the exposed plain of his chest, wasted and cooling, distracting him only fleetingly from the advancing bottle and the hideous burn of his arm.

The bottle advances again.

Jesse screams out. “No!” He tries to muster, but the sound is stifled by the lips of the bottle being forced into his mostly-closed tips. It’s tipped back until more amber liquid spatters down his face and chest. A good portion wets the rag between his teeth and fills his mouth until he feels like he’s inhaling it and then Jesse’s bucking out wildly again, choking, hoping to god that if he dies tonight, he’ll have the good sense to do it now and do it painlessly.

But the hands on his head release him and then somebody’s thumping his chest hard to alleviate his gasping.

It makes it all the worse. He coughs out violently. The fist threatens to bring itself down again before somebody intervenes.

“Easy.” He hears a voice from behind him --frighteningly close, and soft in it’s intimacy. It makes Jesse’s tears all the more bitter as he feels an upside-down hand pet the side of his face almost affectionately. “Easy, baby. It’s nearly over.”

Even with his eyes open, Jesse wouldn’t be able to see Johnny. And right now he doesn’t think he could bear to.

He opens them, all the same, looking about just for a second, wishing it to be different. Knowing, in his agony, that to see Johnny’s blue eyes, even for a second, would put him at some kind of ease.

But he doesn’t --he can’t. He has nothing but the sight of the dirty ceiling as the needle cuts another hard line and has him jerk out again. Hopeless, Jesse realises, hopeless to this all, condemned to the desert, he closes his eyes.

Gabe opens his.

The bedroom is cold. That thin sort of darkness that tells of impending daybreak is coming through the gaps in the blinds at the window. Jack is still besides him, breathing lightly, resting quietly, on his side, as always. His face is neutral and peaceful. Right as he was left. It’s been maybe ten minutes, if that, since Gabe last opened his eyes. The room never changes. The measure of light, does, incrementally.

Sleep evades him. Maybe he fears it.

Too much to consider, that might creep into his dreams. Deadlock. Mexico. Jesse. Hell, even Ana’s warning and her cruelty occurs to him.

He wonders about the open skies of the beaches in Mexico. Where the sea meets the sky in some cerulean blur as if all things are sequential and continuous. Thinks about horse-shoe prints in the sand. The smell of cigarettes and longing. It does him no good at all.

He extricates himself from Jack. Careful not to wake the other man as he stands up and walks to the bathroom.
Gabe is quiet in pulling the door to before he opts for the light. It feels harsh and ungainly --he looks about the same beneath it. That doesn’t matter much. He spends no real time looking at himself, instead opting for the cabinet instantly. The benzos should be where he left them, at the top, in their tangerine bottle. Relief from waking, in two or three pills.

But the top shelf is empty. It appears they’ve moved.

The unmarked bottle was hardly offensive to the naked eye. Jack wouldn’t have known what was in them. He wouldn’t touch them. What does he care about it? If he was going to touch anything, it would be the nearly-empty carton of cigarettes on the bottom-shelf that he’s left in there incidentally. Yet, there they are: where the benzos are not.

Short on patience, Gabe mutters a swear and crouches to open the cabinet below the sink. He combs among the bottles of bleach and spare rolls of toilet paper to no avail. Irritated, he closes the door hard and goes searching in the one above the sink, again, roaming through other bottles, convinced that it’s got to be here, it wouldn’t have moved, he definitely put them in here and he just wants to sleep and--

A shadow drops into the room. Gabe looks to the door in time to see Jack standing there, in a shirt and nothing more.

His hair is a mess. There’s an orange bottle in his fist that looks awfully familiar. Jack rattles it in a sharp motion.

“Looking for something?” He asks. His voice is rusty with sleep.

Gabe leans heavy on the sink and looks away. Didn’t think he’d be having this conversation tonight. “Jack,” He begins. “Please, let’s not--...” He drags a hand down his face. “Can we not do this now?”

It’s with some strange, uncharacteristic softness that Jack says, “Why?” It’s not a derivative question --it’s earnest. He really wants to know, as he takes a step further into the room. “Is something going to change at some other time, and make this easier?”

Tiredly, then, too tired for this world, Gabe backs down to sit on the edge of the bath. Jack is standing in his only visible exit. He can’t well slip out of this one. “It might.” He jokes, emptily.

“Gabe.” Jack isn’t having it. Again, it’s not with malice. He sounds tired, too. But this conversation is long overdue.

So Gabe sighs. “I know.” He says, guiltily. “I just --having trouble sleeping, that’s all.” It’s late enough that he hopes that will be the end of it. Like some award-winning excuse will solve this. Christ, it might. Jack has never really asked before. Not in a way that suggests he’s willing to listen, anyway. Not like this. “It’s not a big deal.”

That’s the truth, too. Benzos are the least of any evils in any pill bottles on this base.

It’s not as easy as saying that, though, and being believed. The last time they had a conversation like this, it was codeine. And it hadn’t been much of a conversation at all.

Silently, he watches jack take off the cap of the bottle and peer inside. “Guess you won’t mind if I have a few?” He asks, quietly. “Seeing as how they’re not a big deal.” Using his forefinger, he
retrieves a tiny, pale pill and holds it there, on the tip of his finger. Looks up at Gabe with a lost, almost testing gaze.

Gabe levels with him. “You know why you can’t do that.” He says. He looks at the floor, then, and the sink. Anywhere but Jack, for a second. “But they’re --they’re not dangerous. I just need them.”

It isn’t immediately convincing. Because Jack remains there, holding the last few traces of Jesse in his hands and looking unimpressed. His mouth is in that uncertain sort of line where he’s considering something. Does it all the time in meetings. Used to drive Gabe crazy. “And this is it?”

“What?” Gabe looks at him, then.

Jack sighs. “This is it? There aren’t more of these stashed away somewhere?” He scrapes his fingertip against the rim of the bottle to get the pill of of his finger and stares at the few that are left. “You don’t have something --something worse--”

“They’re it.” He’s honest, at least. Not that it would be difficult to acquire more, and not that he hasn’t thought about the evidence locker, or any of his agents with ties to Japan. But he hasn’t done anything. Right now they’re all he has. “Medical would’ve given me the same thing, anyway.”

Jack’s eyebrows lift a little like that remark is somehow typical. “So you didn’t even ask.” He says, quietly. Lifts his head up to come inside. “You go all the way to Japan for these? Or just over the state border?”

The question is fair enough --if surprising. Gabe opens his mouth to speak, and then closes it.

Bites his lip so hard he can feel it bleeding --and then Johnny’s hand comes down again, soothingly.

“Jess, baby.” He says, his voice streaming over the white-hot heat of the needle when he talks again. The only thing anchoring Jesse to anything at all as he cries. “You gotta relax.” The words are right by Jesse’s ear. Too much --his nerves are frayed to all hell that every sense feels like an assault and he can barely keep himself together. There’s blood in his mouth. On his face. Johnny does nothing to wipe it away. “It’ll be so much worse for you if you don’t relax.”

Jesse doesn’t believe in a worse. Weakly, pathetic, he still tries to struggle back, and away. Like it will make any difference to the rough and lecherous hands that keep him pinned.

He lifts his hips again with some kind of renewed strength. There’s no more adrenaline left in him, and sometimes when the fraught panic spikes in him, it’s enough to have him scrambling again, desperately. He fights --thinks of Gabriel, and the Rio Grande. Of how he’d thought, for a second --really that that he could--

“Hold still!” A voice at his left barks. Maybe it’s the one with the needle, and why for a second the pain subsists and he’s left only with a dull, raw burning in his arm. But then arms arm pulling him harder --as if stretching him, and the sensation returns, sudden and frightening enough that his hips lift again

There’s a weak link, and one of this legs manages to grapple free as he kicks out against one of his assailants, seeing space --seeing some hopeless window ow freedom that’s breathing an inch. He plants his heel into the bar and tries to force himself up, only to be dragged back down hard onto the bar. The wood thumps his skull. His brain aches. Hands fix back onto his leg. Harder, this time.
It sets a panic amongst the others like wildfire. The man at his left barks again, "I said to keep him--"

He gets talked over. "Give him a shot." Miss Marie, still behind them. Still watching. "He’ll be nice and still then."

Jesse stills in a heartbeat. A thrill of cold --of where the whiskey and blood and tears are drying occurs to him. God only knows what they’ll do to him after a shot: what they’ll do with him when he’s lax and unresponsive, unable to resist or do much of anything. It scares him so horribly that he lifts his chin, desperate, trying to find Johnny as he shakes his head.

He makes a noise of horror behind the rag in his mouth. ‘I’ll be good’, he wishes he could beg, ‘I won’t move, I won’t--’ but it’s almost too late when his eyes worm their way to the op of the socket and he sees Johnny above him. The needle is already out --clear and terrifying.

They share a look, for a second. Johnny looks down at him and sees more, fresh tears. Sees all of Jesse’s fear. It gives him some kind of pause. His hands hesitate. He leans down and kisses Jesse’s forehead real gentle --gentler than he’s ever been before. It looks like he’s almost smiling, with his mouth the way it is. Like he’s showing some kind of mercy.

Then he uncaps the needle.

Jesse starts to squirm again. Bites down hard on the rag and shakes his head desperately. His feet kick out for purchase. He makes a low, pathetic noise. To no avail.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Johnny says, softly --so damn softly, putting a hand on Jesse’s shoulder. “But we couldn’t have you runnin’.”

Jesse’s head is shaking again. His mouth tries to make the sound for ‘please’. Tries to find the words for ‘I’ll be so still, I’ll be good, I’ll stay’.

It’s worse that the injection is the most painless part. It’s in his arm before he can do anything about it, and then Johnny’s hand is on his face again, thumbing clumsily at his tears. “Hey, now.” He coos. “Hey, now, there ain’t no need for cryin’.”

The cold tingles in his arm. He doesn’t have much longer left. He looks up into Johnny’s eyes.

Johnny looks right back at him, guiltlessly. “Don’t be like this.” He says, gently. Brushes some of the hair out of Jesse’s eyes almost lovingly. “You was gonna leave me, baby. We couldn’t have that.”

The edges of his vision are already blurring. His head begins to feel even heavier. Jesse knows it’s too late --knows it’s hopeless. It one last act of modesty, he tries to bring his thighs together. Tries to tear his face away from Johnny’s hand. The room is filling with water, he fears. Sluggish and underwater, he barely hears Johnny say, “That’s it, Jess.”

His eyes are closing. His limbs are useless to him, now. The needle continues to buzz.

“That’s it.” Johnny’s voice goes with him into the darkness. “You get some rest.”

Jesse sleeps: and Gabe remains mercilessly awake.

Looks to the door. To Jack. He moves his shoulders awkwardly. He sighs. He thinks about
formulating an answer to Jack’s condescending question until Jack comes inside a little more and tosses the now-closed pill bottle back to Gabe.

“What is it, anyway?” He asks, still quiet. Looking younger in the dark. “Dreams?”

“Not always.” Gabe shakes his head. He looks down at the bottle in his hands and replays the scene. They’ve been handed to him. Back to him. Some gesture of trust? A test of strength? He looks to Jack for a clue. He doesn’t really understand. “It’s thoughts, you know?” He makes a noise of laughter. “Can’t ever get myself to shut off.”

Jack’s head tilts a little like he’s considering it. He comes fully inside, now. Leans his back against the sink and looks down at his feet. “Was that--” As if pained, he swallows. “Was it the same with the other stuff?”

Gabe thinks of the time before. Of conversations in other rooms: Jack with his head in his hands, pill bottles emptied down sinks and toilets. Withdrawal and fever, sickness and shivers. The pleasant numbness of before became lost. The first few nights were sleepless and cruel. They’ve never been the same since.

Distantly, Gabe shakes his head slowly. “Different.” He says, awkward --stifled in his words like the question hasn’t granted him permission to talk about it. Jack has never really asked before. Not like this. “That was pain stuff. That was for--...” Coughing, almost embarrassed, he sighs. “There’s this click I get, in my head, when I took enough of ‘em. Made me peaceful.”

Jack’s jaw works like he wants to say something but he doesn’t. His distant look of horror is vindicating. Does this really surprise him? Did he think the other pills were fun? That Gabe was just bored, or cruel? That he wanted to destroy himself? It wasn’t a desire to take them at the time like some whim. He wanted to take those pills like an animal in a trap wants to bite it’s own leg off.

Then Jack relents --something he never does. Usually, he can’t bear to let some controversy lie unresolved, not in his favour. But this is different. The way he leans his head down and shakes it.

It can’t be real when Gabe hears him murmur, “I’m sorry.” He looks at Jack and swears it’s some trick or hallucination. But not so. Because then Jack looks up and there’s something of his expression that’s new. That for all these years and time Gabe hasn’t seen before and doesn’t recognise.

His mouth quirks at something like a smile. Thought Jack was out of surprises for him. Wrong, again.

“Yeah?” he asks, after a few moments, as if to test the reality once more.

Jack nods. “Yeah.” His eyes come up halfway, shyly. His hands fiddle with eachother. “For what’s it’s worth now, I mean.” With some quiet, lingering breath, he exhales and gives Gabe the full benefit of his gaze, finally. In this light, there’s less grey in his hair, and his eyes look as bright and blue as distant moonlight. “I should’ve --should’ve been there for you. Or, --or, should’ve--”

He’s cut off with some uncomfortable noise of laughter. “Well,” Gabe says, with a tight throat. “It doesn’t matter now.” With a lax wrist, he puts the pill bottle down on the soapcatch of the bath and stands up, moving towards the door, and in turn, moving towards Jack. The proximity is disarming. Jack’s scent is airy and refreshing, and it does him all the good in the world to experience it. “C’mon.” He says, gently. “We got a big day ahead of us.”
The sting looms over Gabe’s head, nearly as heavy as the thought of Jesse: hanging over him like the sword of damocles.

It feels easier when Jack nods. Permitting the ‘we’.

“Right behind you.” He says, softly. Lifting a gentle hand and brushing Gabe’s arm as they pass each other in the doorway.

Gabe makes it back into the bedroom, pilless, but somehow tireder, like something has come to an end. Some sort of long-lasting suspense has ended. He hears the bathroom door close and feels some distant pity for Jack: it’s the third time tonight. No wonder he’s so tired.

He leans back into the sheets and laughs breathlessly.

It’ll all be over tomorrow.

- 

Jesse wakes to madness.

It’s the end of the world.

- 

Seven dead. Forty-three in custody. Deadlock took the bait, alright.

The sun is high in the sky and Ana’s rifle continues to watch above their heads. Most of the time she doesn’t even use the scope. But every time, the shot hits it’s mark. The medulla oblongata: an immediate disabler, if not an instant death.

Company A have cleared the left perimeter of the gorge: gangsters dragged out of their miserable holes. The ones they didn’t drag were clipped trying to escape: blood-shadows out in the distance of the desert. Mere specks on the horizon. The rest are cooling off in the back of transport vans -- the almost armada of them half-full already.

The relief team come and go with black bags. Company B are still working on the right of the perimeter. The initial altercation is over. Those who haven’t dropped their guns are either holding their breath or no longer breathing. Crates are being carried out of warehouses, stamped from all over, going to all over. Intercepted tech from the Lijang Space tower, unmarked japanese crates with dragons stamped on them in black ink.

There’s enough military grade equipment in the first four tech crates alone to level most of Detroit. Gabe gets a full rendition over his earpiece from Jack, as he is, on the scene and happy to take inventory.

(It was the last thing Gabe ever wanted -- for him to come to this backwater stretch of land. The shape of the rocks in the horizon looks like Jesse’s body stretched out on the sheets. The swirling amber and red of the rock remind him of the dusky tones of the boy’s skin. He must be a million miles from here, but even so, it remains.)

Jack is more than happy to stay out of trouble, too, even if it means losing face further with the Blackwatch troupe for not getting his hands dirtier (how little they know). The tang of blood would
upset his stomach too much, anyway, so Jack remains graciously cautious in the face of resentment. He stays with Company A and relays information to Gabe as he takes his own route, on the edge of Deadlock territory. At the edge of the universe.

Company C will be right behind him. Clearing out the last of this place: the diner, the auto shop, and this place.

But Gabe will be the first in.

The ‘No Vac’ sign doesn’t even flicker to greet him, this time. The looming rock-face boxes him in. Leans in to stare him down --a speck of dust among the cosmos as he is. The wind picks up. The scent of creosote occurs to him. It isn’t anything more than a memory: some bold notion of wistfulness as he hears Jack’s breath in his earpiece. His mate. The one who should be possessing him.

“West.” He says, very quietly, obscured from the building’s view by an old fence-bracket he’s half-crouched behind. “The old motel building. Signs of life?”

There’s a moment and some distant clicking. Eyes in the sky is more than a sniper or too. Deadly as Amari is (though loathe Gabe is to admit it), they have satellite covered. Jack can relay what they pick up through tin-roofs. Strange, monstrous infrared images of bodies and their scent patterns but nought more.

It will only take a second. If that --a single second, to find the right image, and determine if there are any shapes inside, and if one of those boiling bodies is Jesse’s. Hot between the neck and the legs. Sweet, naive thing.

God hope he listened. God hope he ran.

It’s silent for longer than he thinks he can bear. Then Jack is speaking.

“Six hostiles in the motel. Nine or more in the auto-shop --watch yourselves.” Jack’s voice is a soothing transition back to focus. It reminds him of the crisis in some way that could be romantic. So long their voices are in eachother’s ear, and their at eachother’s backs --well, they seem to live a lot longer. “Diner’s a ghost town.”

It is an open channel, though. He isn’t allowed much sentimentality for very long.

He knows the layout to every building here by rote. Must have stared at them for hours, cumulatively. He feels native to the place when he instructs, “Two exits. Cover the left and then right flank. Move out.”

His best six of Company C move silently and without hesitation. Their formation is tight and beautiful. He watches them go.

Then he signals to the diner. “Tanner, Flannery and Neiman --sweep it for contraband. I don’t want a single goddamn stone unturned.”

That leaves him with Mercer. A sure-shot. He only needs one man to cover him if there are six in the motel --and even then, it’s mainly for Jack’s sake.

Jesus, there would be ten or more in there, and he’d still be the only one to come out breathing.
“Keep your eyes on the auto shop.” Gabe says, as he watches the last of the troupe he sent that way disappear into the red rock. They’ve already lost the element of surprise. These are the survivors -- the ones who knows they’ll be taken out by fire if they run and killed on sight if they fight. A last stand in some grimy car shop, awaiting death or arrest, probably praying for some deus ex machina.

He’s seldom seen a more pathetic thing.

If Gabe is ever no good to himself, holed up, just trying to drag his life out for a few moments more, he sort of wishes somebody would do the honourable thing and shoot him, if by then he hasn’t done it himself.

It’s what he’s thinking about as he descends upon the motel with Mercer at his back, service pistol drawn, treading quietly. They come upon the main entrance before splitting -- Mercer takes to the main door, and Gabe uses the fire escape to reach the end of the hall on the second floor. They break in on a silent count of three--

Two.

One.

Gabe kicks. The lock bursts loud enough to mimic gunfire. He takes a quick step inside and uses the door as cover to stare down the airy, open passage. There’s a shout and the scuffle of footsteps. He feels a shot ring out from further down the hall. Hits the wall a foot behind him, too far to the left to worry him. A clue as to the shooter’s whereabouts.

Gabe gets low, then. Waits on Jack.

“One at the end of the hall.” his voice comes ever-so-timely. Sounds harsh with tension. The stress can’t do him or the baby any good at all. He should have stayed on base. “Two in the same room behind him. Three more on the top. Same room, back left.”

Another shot rings out, and Gabe feels himself grow heavier and colder with focus. He waits on it -- for the nerves to kick in. He’s already aiming by the time face appears at the end of the hall, staring down the barrel of their gun.

On shot, missing the head and catching the poor bitch in the neck. The gun in her hand goes off on impact, fired into the ceiling as she slumps backwards, clawing at her neck, choking on blood and making these terrible, gurgling noises. It can’t be helping. The panic is only halving the precious time she has left.

Somebody in the room cries out. The body moves like somebody inside the room is trying to drag the body inside. Gabe isn’t an animal.

He puts the girl out of her misery with another shot.

Then her body is still.

He moves down the rest of the hall soundlessly. He pauses outside of the door.

“One behind the bed. One in the ensuite.”
Gabe has never been a hesitator.

He steps inside on the inside of his foot --the noise enough to startle the one behind the bed, and it’s a clean two shots to the chest that do him in --the shots almost loud enough to over the noise of boot on linoleum, but Gabe is quick, and turns in time to see the a figure trying to emerge from the bathroom.

Another two. This time the first is clean, to the head, and the exit sound prays goudy pieces of blood and brain all over the yellowing bathroom. The body crumples, lifelessly, soundless but for the dull thump of it to the floor.

He can hear shots downstairs. He hopes for the best.

A single tendril of smoke curls from the nose of his service pistol. He heaves a sigh.

“How’s the shop looking?” He asks, quietly, stepping over the body of the girl in the doorway and surveying the empty hall. Briefly, his body turns as if instinctively, and looks in on the room exactly a floor above Jesse’s. The door is ajar. It’s standard and empty. No signs of life. “You find--”

Then Jack is shouting “Watch your--”

A shot tears through his words and vibrates through the ceiling as if shot up. Gabe hardly knows what to do until he hears another one-two-three-four--...and then, silence.

He leans heavy on the wall behind him. He swallows.

“Mercer?”


Gabe knows it. He knows it before Jack can say a damn word. “Two--...” his voice is heavy with solemnity. “Two hostiles present. Bottom left.”

Moving forward already, Gabe makes towards the stairs at the end of the hall. The ones covered in a cheap, patterned carpet. The ones he has never taken before. “Affirmative.”

He makes it down them as quietly as possible. His gun remains at the level of his eye. He listens, hard, for the signs of life he can hear. Footsteps. Voices. Stirring --like somebody is pacing. Pacing, of all things, here? And now? Gabe remains hiding in the shadow of the stairwell, pressed into the wall. Waiting.

He hears the footsteps stop. He hears some breathless noise of horror.

Then, through the plaster --a voice. “Jesus Christ.” Gabe can hear fear. “Oh, Jesus Christ, he’s dead!” There’s more movement, then. An altercation --a scuffle of some sort. A noise of pain, and then the voice returns, harder. More frantic. “What the fuck did you do?! What did you--”

“I didn’t--” There’s a protest. So fleeting that gabe could almost miss it.

But he doesn’t miss it. He hears it: plain and clear as a single, grey cloud in an otherwise clear sky. A second voice. A familiar voice.

But Jesse is supposed to be a thousand miles from here. Far away. The other side of the goddamn
Rio Grande by now.

There’s more movement. Gabe can hardly say what’s happening until he hears another bullet fire off and the sound of something knocking against the far wall. “Shut your mouth!”

There’s a noise of pain. Is that Jesse? Is Gabe merely hallucinating, like in the pictures?

Jack’s voice hits him like a fever dream, hotter than shame and thicker than guilt. “Looks like they’re after each other.” he says, like Gabe could even move. Like he can bring himself to do anything. “Now’s your window.”

The gun feels wrong in his hand. Mercer’s body is probably already cooling in there. He thinks about blood in Jesse’s sheets. Blood on the kid’s skin. He doesn’t move.

A fearful voice in his ear prompts him again. “Gabe?”

There’s another cry of pain and the shatter of something like glass or porcelain. An honest-to-god scream. “Johnny--!”

Jesse.

Oh, Crucified Christ; Jesse.

There’s more noise. Gabe is done listening. He is moving before he can think it. Taking out his earpiece and crushing it under his heel.

Inside is a vision of hell.

In at least one sense: familiar.

The two left don’t hear him come in. Don’t see him. Too distracted by their ensuing scuffle. The tall, looming figure of Johnny Ringo is smothering Jesse’s body, pressing him flush to the wall. His elbow is bent. In one of his gloved hands is a revolver, pressing up at an angle, right underneath the soft, sweet flesh of Jesse’s jaw. The other is holding him there as he noses, grotesquely, at the kid.

Jesse might be crying. It’s impossible to say.

Mercer’s body is in the middle of the floor. His mouth is open. Both his eyes would be, too, if one of them wasn’t torn open and bloody. The back of his head is in pieces. Shot right through the eye. Soundless and motionless.

Johnny Ringo speaks.

Blithely unaware.

“Shh,” He murmurs, pressing the cold metal of the gun against Jesse. “Don’t be afraid, baby. It’ll only take a second. Don’t fight me.”

There’s a staggering, awful breath. Jesse’s noises indicate a struggle, like he’s trying to push away and free himself. All the worse when the hammer clicks, and the kid whimpers anew, starting to beg. “J-Johnny--”
The broader man’s voice is a pantomime of calm when he speaks. “I won’t let ‘em take you, baby. It’ll be worse for you if they take you--”

There’s a childish, staccato sniff. Jesse begs still. “Johnny --Johnny, please--”

The gun jabs deeper into Jesse’s neck. “You killed an officer.” Johnny Ringo says, cooly. “They’ll kill you for that. Send a thousand volts through you.” He moves again, and makes some noise like he’s planting his lips on the skin of Jesse’s forehead. “I won’t let you suffer, sweetheart. I won’t.”

There’s another noise of struggle and Johnny Ringo has to take a step back to compensate for a second. Then his free hand comes higher, pinning Jesse’s other arm in a new place. Gabe cannot see his expression, but hears the tension in his jaw as he shakes his head. He’s close enough to hear the ragged breath of Johnny’s whisper, this time, as he says, “Dont fight me, baby.”

Gabe lifts his arm.

“We all got it comin’.”

You first. He thinks.

You first. He shoots.

Jesse screams.

The gun barely grazes Johnny Ringo’s temple before it goes off, and the sound is so close it’s inhuman. He makes no cry or sound of pain, and then suddenly chunks of skull and brain and a spattering of blood paint the far wall and the bed. Some catches on Gabe. Most comes for the carpet as Johnny’s body sways and then collapses, suddenly limp.

His mouth is open, just like Mercer’s, as he falls backwards onto the carpet, young face twisted in surprise --not even agony. The pistol in his hand falls by his ankles.

Gabe remains standing.

Jesse does, too. Pressed against the wall. White. Unbreathing. He holds it for about ten seconds before the shock wears off. And then falls to his knees like he can no longer hold himself up

Blood covers his face and hair. A solid chunk of brain hangs in one of the longer strands at the front. The only thing visible there through the forest-dark of his hair over his face, and the bloody remains of Johnny Ringo on his face are Jesse’s eyes. Staring at the body. So fearful they are almost vacant.

Gabe holsters his gun. He stands above Jesse where he is.

There is smoke curling in the room from the shot. The faint smell of gunmetal, the tang of iron in blood.

The kid looks close to crying again. His face is so haunted. Gabe despises the very sight of him. Despises himself, most of all, for allowing himself to feel, so deeply, for this kid.

Jesse looks worse than when last they parted. There’s a red bandana tied around his arm that looks dark, like some wound had bled into the fabric and fused it with the flesh, for now. Gore obscures all of his features. His long, skinny legs bring themselves into his body. Gabe aches to touch him.
He can only resist it for so long. Then he’s leaning down, bending slightly to pick a piece of silvery-pink brain from Jesse’s hair. To look him right in the eyes.

One of Jesse’s shaking hands comes up to Gabe’s face. Touches him so faintly. So fearfully. The kid’s eyes are brimming with tears.

Then something cold thrills at the top of his abdomen, just below where his chestpiece ends.

Then Jesse’s hands are no longer shaking.

His other hand wields Johnny Ringo’s revolver and noses it deep into Gabe’s chest.

Through gritted, angry teeth, he hears Jesse speak.

“Get your fuckin’ hands offa me.” The kid says. His voice is ragged and cruel. The gun noses itself deeper into Gabe’s skin. “Get back!”

Gabe’s mouth opens and shuts. Jesus, he almost wants to smile. His knees go to straighten, first. One of his legs takes a step back. Gabe keeps his hands at the level of his shoulders.

Thee kid doesn’t really have the nerve to shoot. At least, not him, so he feels no particular fear to say, “I told you to get out of here.”

Jesse’s hands are steady as ever. He keeps his gun trained over Gabe’s chest. Over his heart.

It isn’t enough to frighten Gabe. “I told you to lea--”

“You told me you wasn’t a cop, neither.” Jesse says. His voice is strange and pinched. His other hand is feeling over Johnny Ringo’s body. Is he --is he trying to feel for a pulse? The gun doesn’t move from Gabe.

The room is tense and still. Gabe’s jaw works. “I’m not a cop--”

Jesse’s eyes turn back on him. There’s fresh blood on his hands, now, that gets on the metal of the gun as he holds it with both hands again. “Whatever you are.” The kid hisses. “Gimme your gun.”

The one at Gabe’s holster? Jesse isn’t as dumb as he seems. Gabe bends a little and goes to reach it. Jesse hisses to stop him.

“Slowly.” The kid growls. “Slowly.”

In a deliberate and safe fashion, Gabee holds up his hands again, mostly for show, before he takes the gun out by it’s hilt easily. He holds it out for Jesse’s benefit.

The kid twitches, a little, gesturing with the tip of his own gun. “Unload it.” Gabe’s hands work with an automatic precision. He ejects the magazine. It falls to the carpet. “Put the gun on the floor.” Jesse murmurs. “An’ kick it over.”

The movements are again as deliberate as they can be. Jesse wouldn’t dare take the shot. But it doesn’t hurt to humour him, one last time. His fear is palpable, but beneath it, he smells so warm and sweet. So young. But youth will be no excuse for the body on the floor. Mercer is a good agent --
The gun reaches Jesse with minimal resistance. He doesn’t move to get it immediately. The gun is still trained on Gabe, but his eyes, and his other hand is hesitating over Johnny Ringo’s body.

There’s a look to him Gabe has never seen when Jesse tears his eyes off of the body. An anger -- more intensely-felt that he thinks he has ever witnessed before. The kid’s wrist makes some motion to the right, and Gabe realises he’s gesturing to Mercer’s body, where another service pistol is but an inch away from the body’s cooling hand. “Kick his over too.”

Gabe keeps his hands in the air for the sake of appearances. Jesse is a lot of things, but he’d not the sort to pull the trigger. Not on Gabriel, anyway. After the events of their last meeting, Jesse owes him life. Or, at least something to that effect.

He kneels to grasp the weapon and Jesse barks out again. “I said kick.”

Gabe pauses. He sighs, but continues to leav down to pry the gun from Mercer’s fingers. “I’m just--”

He feels the shot before he hear it. It whistles right past his ear, fast and deadly enough to streak the air with all the heat and fury of the boy who it comes from. It pierces the dresser far behind Gabe -- and he knows without looking that the shot was maybe three inches or less from his temple. He moves back from the body. He looks back at Jesse.

The kid’s hands aren’t shaking. There’s blood all over his face, still. “I said kick.” He repeats himself through his teeth.

So Gabe relents. He kicks the other gun across the room as he murmurs, trying not to alarm the kid. “You gonna shoot me?”

He watches Jesse fumble to empty Mercer’s pistol before tossing the magazine and the gun onto the bed, out of reach of the both of them. He was supposed to be at least over the state line --further than the ‘high side’, at least. Maybe Jesse can’t even ride a horse. Maybe he wants to die here, in this room, where he will exist as a permanent feature in the locked basement of Gabe’s mind.

Footsteps are muted in the carpet. Jesse comes forward again and looks around like he’s trying to formulate some kind of plan. Doesn’t he know it’s hopeless? Eyes are on them. The building is likely surrounded by now. There’s no way out for the kid.

Fuck, why didn’t he listen? Why didn’t he didn’t he just take the money and get out?

The kid’s voice thrills him as he jerks the gun again. “Up against the wall.” Jesse says hurriedly, his eyes darting about like he can feel the forces of Blackwatch circling and closing in on him, some monolithic black shark, frenzied by chum. “Now!”

Gabe moves. Stands facing it with his hands on his head. He knows the drill better than Jesse. He’s played bait before.

Then he’s just standing there, and Jesse is breathing hard behind him, and nothing is happening. The kid doesn’t make a move to run or stay. He just--...remains.

Remains there like he genuinely can’t leave. These sad four walls are his home. There’s nothing beyond the looming red rock. Jesse’s universe ends at the door, almost.
Then a gun is gidding into Gabe’s lower back as he hears Jesse’s voice again: of all things, fragile. Trembling. “I oughta kill you.” He whispers, angrily. The gun noses into Gabe’s spine, but that’s all that it does. “I oughta kill you right now.”

They both hear what Jesse doesn’t say: ‘I oughta kill you for what you did to Johnny’.

Gabe doesn’t flinch. His head drops slightly. He murmurs back, “Then why haven’t you done it yet?”

The gun noses deeper into him.

But Jesse doesn’t pull the trigger.

Can’t? Won’t? It doesn’t matter when the result is the same.

Then there’s the scrape of foot on carpet and something hard at the back of his skull.

- 

There’s a speck on the horizon.

South, as if floating on the red rock from where the heat shimmers and distorts the image of the distance. Tiny enough to be some stray piece of dirt floating in the fluid of Gabe’s eyes. Insignificant enough not to spot. Rail-thin and rabbit-quick.

There’s the tiniest bit of red. A bandana about three-quarters of the way up, catching the light obscenely. Like a flag. Not of surrender, but of something.

He sees Jesse out on the distant horizon when he comes to.

It’s after he takes the earpiece from out under Mercer’s limp, still-warm skull, and overhears them -- Jack, of all people, hot in his ear.

“South perimeter. In the distance.” He sounds terse. “Do you have a clear shot?”

Gabe only sees it then, as he staggers over to the far window. Looks about uselessly until a distant bit of red catches the sun, and he can see it: Jesse, running for his life.

He was never going to get very far. But a kid like that isn’t supposed to die laying down.

There’s a moment of hesitation, and then Ana’s voice fills his skull. “In my sights.”

Gabe thinks about Jesse lying on his back in the sheets.

Thinks about his wide brown eyes under the expanse of neon light.

Not yet twenty. Covered in blood and brains. Running barefoot through the desert for his life.

He hears Jack’s noise of affirmation. His mate says, “Take the shot.”

And take it she does. The blunt thrum of the rifle cracks over the open channel and Gabe swears he
feels it go through him.

And less than a second later, the speck is no more.
Years from now, Jesse will say that getting shot was the best thing that ever happened to him.

(And a few years later still, he will say it was the worst.)

But all he is sure of when he hears the crack of the gun and can imagine the puff of invisible smoke from the rifle is that he is going to die.

The desert is hot under his feet. There’s blood on his hands and on his face and his hair --chunks of gore that are all the only thing left of Johnny Ringo. His arm burns. Tears cut lines through the red on his face. For one slanderous, awful second, he thinks that he’s going to make it. That he’s going to sprint far across the vast expanse of the Chihuahuan desert and across the state border to safety or something like--

The rifle cracks.

Down he goes.

It is needless to say, the shot isn’t what kills him. It enters behind his left knee at some staggering velocity. Jesse feels white-hot heat before anything else. Feels the single round as it tears through his life --like he can see broad daylight on the other side of the bullet.

The scope watches him. Falling forward onto hot earth as he cries out. Pain itself; the image of agony. Curling onto his side to spare his knee anything more.

“Contact.” The eye behind the scope says.

Gabe can see nothing on the shimmering horizon.

End of story --except, not really.

Because a red flag rises like some revolution --some act of impossible defiance, and Ana hardly knows what it is until she sees an arm bandaged by a crimson bandana reaching upwards towards the sky. It comes back down onto the dirt. The body moves.

Jesse claws his way across the desert floor.

And Gabe looks out at the vast nothingness of the wasteland: seeing the roots that clutch and the branches that grow --seeing everything but Jesse. Feeling torn open himself. It was never supposed
to happen like this. Christ, it was never supposed to happen to happen at all.

In his ear, he hears Jack’s voice suddenly come back to him from twenty years ago, worming it’s way through the past and reaching him suddenly. “Status on Reyes?” He had thought that it was off at the root or something to that effect: like Jack’s memory didn’t know it’s way back, but he can hear the genuine concern --the fear.

Gabe used to have the Fear. Maybe he still has something like it now, scanning his horizon desperately, trying to search for the body of the boy taken from him too early. The one whose life split in two the moment he took that hit that should have killed him, and then again when Gabe left him. Jesse should have been bound for Mexico --should have gone to more places and seen more things. Should have had more to his life then that goddamned can of peaches, and yet--...

You only get lucky until you don’t. That Jack has survived all these years --the program, the crisis: the life of it all, and this is how Jesse goes?

“Fine,” He says, at long last, if only to ease Jack. “Nothin’ wounded but my pride.”

Gabe can no longer look at the red rock. He turns to the inside of the room, instead, where blood paints the wall, and Mercer’s body cools alongside what’s left of Johnny Ringo. A bag and it’s contents are sprawled over the floor of the far corner: pill bottles, a carton of cigarette. A brimmed hat on the bed. A dreamcatcher.

Remnants.

He hears Jack’s sigh of relief like some gentle wave crashing. “Medical evac are on their way.”

Of course they are --the gesture is sweet if lost on Gabriel and his ailing heart and the way his eyes are trying to find Jesse in the distance, still. “That’s not necessary,” He says, quietly. “I’m --I’m fine-”

“Not for you.” Then Ana’s cutting in. Her voice isn’t unkind. Maybe it’s just that Gabe has learned to brace himself whenever he hears her speak. “Evac for the hostile on the south perimeter.”

Gabe’s jaw works. He turns back to the window. “You mean relief team?” What are medical going to bring that will change things? They might well save their trouble.

“I mean Medical.” She says, again, and the line clicks distantly like an old radio signal crackling. “Target has only been immobilized.”

Target.

Jesse.

There’s nothing out there for miles. Gabe can’t even make out where the kid would be --body or boy, corpse or otherwise. But Ana’s aim is unerring, and if the kid was supposed to be dead, he’d be dead. Maybe Gabe doesn’t have to believe his eyes. Maybe it’s enough to believe somebody else, for once.

He doesn’t dare to believe it. But he does, immediately. With nobody to see, he feels himself smile. Feels his head shake in disbelief.
He turns back to the room. He steps over Johnny Ringo’s corpse to kneel besides Mercer’s, taking his tags as carefully as he can. The green of Mercer’s only good eye left is open and frozen as it stares forward, startled. Clean entry wound that must have come faster than Mercer could shoot—a feat in itself considering Mercer is his marksman.

By all accounts, a hell of a shot.

The tags he takes out of respect, asking, “Status on the rest of Company C?”

Jack takes this one. Rightly so. His voice is at least a little softer, in that way that makes a good show of pretending like he knows the value of life. “No other casualties on our side. Relief is heading over for them as we speak.”

Deadlock are over—members scattered across the desert, dead or in custody. Blackwatch is still intact. Johnny Ringo is dead on the floor. Yet, of all the relief he feels, the strongest rush of it is from knowing that somewhere out there, on the shimmering orange earth, baking under the sun, Jesse is still breathing.

“Great.” Gabe says, then, and he means it. “Great. I’ll rendezvous with Medical outside.”

Ana’s line clicks again like she’s disconnected. There’s another moment of silent hesitation before Jack speaks again. It’s unlike him to be shy. Let them look you over.” He says, reedily. “Better to be safe--”

It’s sweet, almost. Makes Jack sound all the younger. “I’m fine.” Gabe tries to sound as assuring as possible, like he’s sure about his wellbeing, rather than just stubborn. His rationale differs from Jack’s, in that if it doesn’t kill him, he thinks he can probably walk it off.

But Jack isn’t some card he can easily fool. “You’re reckless. You ought’ve cleared the room as soon as Mercer went down.” his voice is a little harder, now, but the tone is no different. The words come from the same place. “You used to be more careful--”

Suddenly nostalgic, or maybe soft from relief, Gabe hears himself joke. “One of us had to be.”

That much is true. Maybe that’s why Jack lets out some small laugh instead of saying anything more—blessedly, fondly. Like it used to be. It would be all the sweeter if Gabe wasn’t standing here, by a bed that has been cast adrift with the worst of his indignities, in a room that he intends to keep locked forever.

Eventually, Jack speaks again. His voice sounds as warm and passionate as a blindly held conviction. “I’ll see you soon.”

Walking towards the door, Gabe takes the hat from the bed sheepishly. He tests the weight in his hands. “You too.” he says.

When he leaves, he closes the door behind him.

It’s the best he can do without the key.

They fish Jesse off the desert floor they find him on. Hands covered in blood. Face obscured with all
sorts of dirt.

There is no resistance in him left.

Handcuffs slip on his wrists easily. Somebody helps him to his feet.

Things get fuzzier after that --must be something for the pain that leaves his mouth dry and his body pleasantly distant and numb. Jesse doesn’t know how he ends up in a sitting position in some moving vehicle as hands work around him. One set, covered by the serene blue of surgical gloves, starts attendance at his knee. Another peels back the red bandana on his arm.

The scabbing on the wound re-opens. It doesn’t hurt, and blearily, Jesse watches as the neat word of ‘Deadlock’ is obscured by hot, wet blood.

His eyes open again after some indeterminate time, every bit as hazy, feeling suddenly comforted. Something in his brain sings softly to him --safety, alpha; his. His eyes cut around the space dizzily to find the source of it, fearful that he’s hallucinating the comfort of it, only to find a figure close to his side that he recognises.

His hand almost instinctively reaches out before he halts himself. “Gabriel?” His voice a whisper among reeds.

It doesn’t matter what he does when another, stronger hand reaches out to brush him, almost comically gently for the size of the man. His eyes are kind. Jesse feels as if he is out of his own body. “You --y-you’re a cop,” He manages, reedily, his eyes blinking back full consciousness.

It makes Gabriel laugh, above him. “Not a cop.” He says, earnestly. “Never lied to you, kid.” His touch hesitates. There are other voices. Jesse thinks somebody might be touching his leg. “I’m with Overwatch.”

Cautious, Jesse looks down at his own body slowly, and sees some neat, white bandage where the bandana was. Many hands are working over his knee, the blue of the surgical gloves a gaudy, ugly burgundy from the mess of blood.

“Overwatch,” Jesse murmurs, quietly, trying to recall why he knows the name so well. Trying to work out what it is Gabriel might really be here for. “Are we goin’ t’Mexico now?” He twists his head to look at Gabriel.

But Gabriel is looking away.

Medical are working. If it weren’t for their proximity, Gabe knows he would be kneeling by Jesse. Taking the kid’s hand. Promising him: ‘I can fix this. I will fix this.’

But he never says anything at all.

Outside, somebody is shaking a champagne bottle. The foam spills out onto the dirt and disappears quickly into the arid, hungry earth. Medical work: Blackwatch celebrate. He sees Jack smile, and realises, then, equidistant from the kid and his mate, Jack was right all along.

He said ‘it’ll be over soon’.

Now, it is.
Three days later, Jack flies out to Washington to give a public statement.

And for once, on a venture like this, Gabe goes with him.

They take private transport. Jack sleeps, for the most part, drowsing with his head heavy on Gabe’s shoulder. Every so often the transport shakes and his head falls and he wakes himself up, so he only gets ten minutes, give or take. Gabe doesn’t mind. He likes it, really, even if it’s only most incidental. They’re still a few long conversations away from being near square, really.

But they’re closer than they were.

Deadlock remain in custody. It’s probably why Gabe still can’t sleep. He thinks of Jesse: the brand on his arm, the wound on his knee. The look in his eyes when he was holding that gun, brains in his hair, blood obscuring all but his eyes.

His hands wring. He was supposed to keep the kid safe.

When they land, Jack goes to meet with his PR team, and Gabe goes to the hotel suite they’ve had secured for the night. Wouldn’t normally stay, but the travel is likely to wear Jack out far more now, given that he’s just gone seven weeks. The room is lush and spacious; he keeps himself busy with a miniature bourbon from the small fridge provided, sitting out on the window’s ledge to enjoy the late spring air, and the city.

It’s over, isn’t it? Christ, he’s got everything he ever wanted, doesn’t he? Deadlock are gone. Jack has made more time for him in this last week than in the previous year. They’re talking about getting away from this all, and making some kind of life.

So, why isn’t it enough? Something has to change. Gabe is lucky in so many ways, he knows. Yet, still, he thinks about all that he doesn’t have. Nights are still restless for him. His only dispensary left for any kind of peace is the evidence locker, and even then, his sins still find him. Every pill he takes tastes like Jesse.

Jack gives the statement about an hour later, with Gabe watching from the wing, with no particular intimidation as he faces the full room and the thousand-eye-lens of each and every opportunistic camera.

Wardrobe have been at it beforehand, and it shows the moment Jack even appears. Shadows fall more favourably on his face. His complexion looks warmer and much more vital. There’s less grey in his hair. The drawn look he’d been sporting as he slept is nowhere to be seen. To himself, Gabe notes --he’s glowing.

Well-rehearsed, too. He talks about domestic terrorism, Deadlock’s known ties --the importance of intelligence and the hard work and resilience of all who were responsible in the apprehension. They love it when he talks about the ‘goal of over-arching peace in a post-crisis age’. It’s always been a real photo finish.

Afterwards, Jack takes a long shower and Gabe takes a seat by the largest window again, throwing complimentary peanuts from the ledge. Makes no move to join Jack --they shower at different temperatures (he lacks the nerve), and so it’s quiet and still in the room until Jack re-emerges, with
his hair all plastered down to his brow, and a towel slung low on his waist.

He goes over to the end table between two armchairs where the peanuts had been, and when he doesn’t find them, he looks up tiredly. “I was going to eat those, you ass.” It’s a good kind of tired, though, because he’s smiling. He’s coming over.

The peanut in Gabe’s fingers is surrendered back into the packet. “There’s a few left.” He says mildly, holding up the bag. “I thought you weren’t hungry, anyway.”

Jack takes the bag, and then, surprisingly, comes to sit by his mate. The shower has taken off his studio lighting and glow, but the heat of the shower has left his cheeks a little rosy, saving him from looking drawn. The mark on his neck is equally rosy, but faint --so faint. What’s left is like a crescent moon disappearing behind a clouded veil.

It’s what Gabe’s looking at when Jack takes a peanut from the bag, and brings it halfway to his face before launching it out of the window instead. “You want to get room service instead?”

Gabe laughs. “You gonna be able to keep anything down?”

With some serene sigh, Jack shrugs. “Let’s hope so.” He tosses the last two left in the packet, one after the other, and they disappear into the deep cobalt of the street far below. With him this close, Gabe can feel the heat of his shower radiating from Jack’s skin. Can smell his scent and the way the sandalwood of his soap sharpens the wintriness, and it utterly seduced by it.

An impression of it lingers when Jack gets up and goes over to the menu. “You hungry?”

Gabe shakes his head. He listens to the way Jack’s voice sounds as he talks into the telephone and continues to look out into the night. It’s a wistful night --he’s not sure why. A few clouds veil the clouds, as if a warning for potential rain, and Jack lingers like the warning of a potential conversation. He’s got questions --they both have, and for a long time, too.

The asking is hesitant, though, and doesn’t come until Jack is dressed (an old grey triblend shirt, the standard issue in the SEP and one of the only remnants), and finishing his soup. There’s only so much he’s bold enough to eat. Gabe doesn’t mind. They circle through news channels reporting the public statement for a while, until Jack speaks.

“I used to think I’d see your name on here.” He says, off-handedly, sounding distracted until he feels Gabe looking at him. “During the promotion. Everybody was wondering why it wasn’t you.” His head cants. He sighs. “I was convinced somebody would find out.”

It’s an ugly thing to bring up, but it needs be done. With no particular affliction, Gabe shrugs. “Somebody at the UN clearly did.” It doesn’t hurt anymore. The withdrawal is over. It was his own fault, anyway, and they both know it. “Kind of ironic, you being so worried about it.”

Clearly guilty at bringing it up, Jack looks at him, pleadingly, but lost. “Ironic?”

“I figured you were the one that told them.” The world turns the moment Gabe says it. It’s been sitting under his tongue long enough --not the accusation, but the hurt. This secret belief that Jack would still rip him to shreds, mates or otherwise, for the sake of the title.

That’s how the story goes, in Gabe’s mind. The pills: the betrayal. The piteous platitudes from on high about ‘divided priorities’ and ‘a unique skillset that would be better suited elsewhere’.
But not so.

Jack looks mortified, but the way his head hangs shows that he was anticipating that blow. That maybe he feels like he deserves it. “I didn’t.” He says, weakly, and immediately Gabe nods.

“I know.” Then Jack’s head lifts and he looks lost, still. Adrift, at sea. “But I wouldn’t blame you, if...if you had.” That much is the truth. He could have lost years to codeine --his life, in fact, with how it made the world feel softer. Made his skin feel younger, and invincible. Pain no longer had meaning.

Jack’s quiet for longer than solemnity asks. He lits his head again and murmurs, “I should’ve -- should’ve done something, instead of just letting them take--”

How clear his hindsight is. How benevolent, even if it’s meaningless, so Gabe moves closer to him, lays a hand on his mate with a broad, easy touch. “Don’t say that.” He says softly. “What could you do? You had no idea--”

Strangely defensive, Jack resists. “I had some idea.” He protests. “We all did --everybody on the Strike Team. I just --I thought, Christ, the world was ending. I didn’t think it would matter if I said something--....”

It’s there in his voice --regret and sincerity. The kind that has left Jack himself sleepless more than once, thumping his head against the bedframe and wishing that just once, he’d asked. Just once, he’d done something.

It makes it easy for Gabe to be honest. “Clean for eight years. On --on codeine.”

Some faint suggestion of pride flickers over Jack’s face. That’s almost worth these last eight years. Almost worth being dragged through treatment and the pain of withdrawal. It must be pride, and it must be worth it, because it isn’t painful for Jack to ask. “Do you miss it?”

Gabe barks out a sudden laugh at that, startling the both. “Jesus,” He shakes his head. “Only every fucking day.” Maybe it’s crass --it’s at least true. “I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since then.”

It’s supposed to be a light remark. But Jack is on the other side of the glass on this, and he has always has the gift of being able to turn helium balloons into anvils with just a word. This occasion is no different. “So, that’s where the benzos come in. I get that.”

As if distantly guilty, Gabe looks away. It doesn’t deter Jack.

“I just --I still don’t know why you spent so much time down there. In --in New Mexico.” Jack’s tone lacks the steel for accusation. Still hurt. Gabe never did give a reason, or a decent apology. (And Jack never learned to let the little things go.) “Why you left like you did--”

“Jesus,” Gabe says, again, before he’s really thinking, and it’s dangerous enough that Jack shoots him a look before he can get his words together. “What were my other options? I was so tired of seeing you get hurt--”

Jack’s eyes roll derisively. “Well, you didn’t--”

“I was tired of it, too.” Gabe is quick to clarify. To get Jack to look another way --direction or
expression, it doesn’t matter. “You weren’t the only one disappointed.” He sighs. “Every fucking month, Jack.” Overwrought, then --or maybe just ready to be honest, he looks up. “I didn’t leave because I thought it was your fault. I thought it was mine.”

It feels shameful to say. Because then it’s hanging in the air --then Jack knows. All of the power that he gives the other man’s memory to deify it becomes realised, because Jack hears it. He looks stricken, for just a second --maybe, overwhelmed.

Maybe not --then he’s smiling, somehow, and Gabe has never been happier to be at a loss when Jack laughs, “Guess we were both wrong, then.”

And he’s right. It wasn’t Jack’s fault, or Gabriel’s. There is no fault. Deadlock are finished. In the next few days, Jack will start proceedings to hand over to Ana, and they can enjoy a little of the peacetime they sought so hard for, just as they hoped they would.

It’s what he’s thinking --and what he’s sure Jack is thinking when they diminish the distance between them to kiss.

They go to bed together for the first time in weeks. It’s unlike the tense and uncomfortable quiet of before. They can’t look at anything but eachother, and it’s like being backwards in time somehow. Jack is sweet and yielding, and they move into eachother as synchronously as water.

At some point after Jack has finished for the second time, as he’s tightening in approach of a third, Gabe nuzzles towards where the smell of wintergreen and frost is strongest. He runs his tongue over the faint rosy crescent, making Jack whimper.

He doesn’t even think about snapping his jaw shut --biting deep and hard down onto the column of Jack’s neck and marking him once again.

Something primal --something Jack would never consciously indulges, sings at the tension he feels under his teeth: mine.

Then he feels teeth on him, too.

And there can be no doubt about who he belongs to.

- 

Those in custody are held for a week and are given no interrogation or information.

A subsection of Blackwatch’s Company A raid a Los Muertos truck in the middle of a city the next day. The heat is being turned up on all the syndicates alike. Those who aren’t dead or arrested are either fleeing or regrouping. Narcotics out of Japan grow very quiet. Bandits along the Mexican border scatter their forces to the wind.

Ana rewatches the infrared footage from the motel.

Then she watches it again.

They bury Merer on the same day that he brings Jack’s attention to it, and in the cool of his office, they go over the footage together. How it’s the smallest body in the room. How his back is turned, and the gun isn’t even in his hand. The moment a noise comes from the doorway, the body reaches
for the gun in the other man’s belt, whipping around and shooting in a single movement.

The bullet had gone right through Mercer’s eye. Right into his brain.

Good shot.

Damn good shot.

But through the double-sided glass of the interrogation room in the county prison, he doesn’t at all look like it. No, when Jack comes upon the sight, he draws back in horror for just a second when he realises what he’s looking at: just a kid, barely older than eighteen, barely able to tip 125lbs soaking wet.

His hands are chained to the table. The gaudy orange of the uniform hangs on his frame, making the forearms appearing from his rolled-up sleeves look about as thick and brittle as popsicle sticks. There’s a bandage on the left arm, and a knee brace on the same side, only just unobscured by the table.

After a while of watching, Jack has to ask. “That’s really him?”

Ana is reviewing the relevant paperwork they have on him. She looks up, disinterested, but nods. “That’s him.”

There’s not much in his file. A birth certificate that took great difficulty to find --a relic from a Tennessee archive. ‘Jesse Cassidy McCree’, nineteen years of age, blue-yellow colourblind but otherwise in good health. On his arrest report, there’s a laundry list of things: murder, resist of arrest, possession, accessory after the fact, accessory to terrorism, conspiracy to commit, prostitution.

The little Ω beneath the name feels like a personal offense. Not all parts of the world are so kind. And he’s just a kid --Christ, he’s just a kid.

(One who can shoot a gun, and bed men for their money. One who can survive an overdose.

One who can seduce Gabriel with a whisper.)

Jack goes in alone. Ana waits outside, patiently, giving him some look before he goes inside: a shared understanding between omegas. Some strong, protective look.

Then Jack is inside, closing the door besides him, and coming to sit in the chair opposite the boy.

A dark, feathery head of hair lifts absently, and the kid sniffs as he looks up and finds Jack’s face. His eyes are dark. Jack can smell him from across the table, dusky and faintly poisonous, like creosote and dry, cracked earth.

Jack doesn’t even get to speak first. Jesse takes that honour, and with no particular fear or reverence, he drawls, “You’re awful pretty to be a lawyer.”

It catches Jack off-guard. Sounds like a pass, but given the kid’s life --the scars documented in his medical record and his shaken, nervous sort of look, it’s no wonder. Maybe this is the only way he knows how to talk to others.

“Not a lawyer.” Jack settles on. He feels himself leaning forward ever-so-slightly, extending a genial
hand. “I’m the Strike Commander at Overwatch.” Maybe he expected a reaction to that --even if it’s backwards in that little dirt water gorge he’d been pulled from, Deadlock are no small operation, and Jack is sure the kid must have heard of the organisation, at least, even if he isn’t flattered to be known. “I thought we could talk.”

There’s no flicker of recognition or co-operation on the kid’s face. He looks tired beyond the extent somebody his age should, but then he’s looking at Jack like he’s noticed something, and it vexes him.

“So you’re in charge?” The kid asks, with some disparaging look.

Jack nods, and the kid looks even more derisive at the very notion of it.

“Like hell you are.” He mutters, leaning his head into his wrists and turning his head to the side with some sigh. “You --you’re like me.”

Jack takes it for an insult until he realises what it is the kid means. He doesn’t mean like as in criminal, victim --similar, really. What he means is that their designations are the same, and it’s astute enough that it Jack begins to feel mildly uncomfortable, and aware of himself. Sharp sense of smell, or just a lucky guess?

Trying to spin the feeling into amiability, Jack tries to sound more curious than defensive in asking, “What does that mean?”

It doesn’t appease Jesse any, who lifts his head only to drawl out, “People like us to get to bein’ boss without gettin’ to the boss first, if y’know what I mean.” It even draws a laugh out of the kid as he shakes his head. “Nice little mark y’got there, an’ all.”

Jack feels heat in his face. He tries to master the situation. “I should’ve guessed you’d be used to looking.” He says, deliberately. “But you’re not in that line of work anymore.”

It does nothing to deter the kid, who’s sitting up by now, grinning away in this catlike sort of way as his nose twitches. After a few seconds, he asks, “In the family way, are ya? Smells like it.”

By, Jack’s face is hot. He feels a bitter twist of humiliation that does his voice no good in keeping level when he coughs. “That isn’t--”

The kid’s grin widens. ‘Don’t gotta be shy about it. S’jus’ us in here.” He leans back in his seat. “C’mon, kitten, I won’t tell nobody.”

Part of Jack is quietly pleased by the notion of it: some external confirmation of the news. That it isn’t some hallucination that everyone at Overwatch are playing along with. Most of him, however, is less pleased, and he’s conscious enough of Ana looking in that he tries to take the reins again. “How long did you run with Deadlock?”

The kid snorts, and leans on his hands like he doesn’t care a dime for any of this. “What d’you care about any a’ that? Ain’t a Deadlock Gang anymore.”

No wonder Gabe was so long in New Mexico --if this is how long it takes the kid to answer a question, it must take him even longer to sell anything. Jack breathes out through his nose. “None of this is admissible in court. I’m not here for evidence.” He blinks. “You can speak freely.”
The kid coughs out some noise. “Sure.” He mutters. “Sure I can.”

After a few moments of strange stillness, Jack has to prompt him again. “How long?”

Jesse’s shoulders move awkwardly. His wrists yank gently against the handcuffs. “Couple years.” He sniffs. “Maybe six.”

Six years. Jack can’t begin to imagine some dusky boy barely out of childhood, holding a rifle or running packages between checkpoints. In a school backpack of a lunchbox or something. It’s no life, and by the looks of things -- the bandage, the medical report, the prostitution charges: it only got worse.

Jack swallows. He looks towards the glass fleetingly, to where Ana should be, and then back at the boy. “What kind of work did you start out by doing for them?”

He prays not to hear about the poor kid on his knees as a child in front of some bandit. For once, his prayers are listened to.

Jesse scowls, but answers all the same. “Mostly lookout work. Maybe runnin’ a few packages.”

Jack looks over at the stiff bandage on the kid’s arm. The one he knows is a gang brand. Something about cattle occurs to him. He feels distantly sick. “They ever give you a gun?”

The kid looks up at him again with some expression of bafflement. “They gave us all guns.” It isn’t a direct yes. Jack can’t imagine they had any scruples against giving him one off the bat. He cants his head slightly as if in silent challenge. “You any good?”

The kid looks over at the glass nervously, and then back to Jack. “What?”

Jack’s face is still open with challenge. “You any good with one?”

The kid looks about squirming in his seat. He keeps looking over at the glass. The confidence he started with is long gone. “I don’t hafta answer that.” Jesse says, sounding cornered.

Patiently, Jack tries to be of some comfort. “Your answer won’t be used against you in a court of law.” He says, simply. “I want to know about your marksmanship.”

Jesse leans forward like he’s having some difficulty hearing, and then when he does process the words, he sits himself far back in his chair looking absolutely baffled. “My what? Y’wanna know if I can shoot straight?”

Nodding, Jack fights a smile. “That’s one way of putting it, but yes.”

There’s another quiet as he watches thoughts flash across the kid’s face. He looks hard with concentration and caution -- as if he knows the trap he’s about to step into, but he just doesn’t know how it works. But, historically, who else has he been able to trust? It’s hardly a wonder he’s so hesitant to answer.

Eventually, the kid comes out with something. “B’fore I presented -- when I used to play lookout for ‘em, I used to shoot sometimes. Real natural -- no foolin’, an’ I was quick about it, too.” For a second, Jesse looks prou, before even that becomes lost to him. “When I presented, I had t’start
hustlin’. Playin’ with guns weren’t a, uh --a fittin’ occupation for somebody such as me no more.”

That takes a second, again. Jack almost wants to feel insulted, but this isn’t about him. “Because of your designation?”

The kid shrugs easily. “Better money in hustlin’, anyhow.” Just as blasé, but looking at Jack like they’ve both always known it, Jesse smiles. “Our kind make out fine.” He says, sure of himself; certain, now. “Always have.”

His choice so word is intriguing. ‘Our’ --as if he counts Jack among his number. As if they are so alike.

It’s disconcerting enough that Jack stands, as if to go, and Jesse looks up at him, for a moment, fearfully, before the expression turns almost expectant. “That it?” he asks. “Y’don’t want nothin’ else?”

That’s almost too much to hear. The implication exhausts Jack so much that he thinks if he turns to look at the kid he might just faint. So instead he remains looking at the wall when he says, “That’s it.” He takes a step towards the door. “We’ll be in touch.”

Jesse doesn’t say anything more. He lets the situation be, for once, nodding silently to himself as Jack leaves the room, and slips out into the hallway where Ana is waiting.

Jesse is in no way about to be Mercer’s replacement. Not if Jack has any say on the matter.

Ana touches his shoulder lightly. “Well,” She says, breezily. “I like him.”

-

The handover proceedings begin.

Jack never gives a reason anywhere for it --not specifically, and Ana never asks him to. She makes arrangements to take on some of the future projects, and a large amount of work with the public sector and press. She’ll take over almost entirely after he reaches thirty weeks, and then--...

Jack loves his job, but enough to know he’s earned the rest.

Blackwatch continue to move in it’s own circles, but without the sting, Gabe is far less busy. He takes no more trips down to New Mexico. No inventories to meticulously go over, nor maps to navigate or Company rosters to reshuffle. The proximity does them both a clear good, not just in how they go to bed together and wake with eachother, or how they surprise eachother in the shower or share coffee at daybreak.

There are six pills left in Gabe’s Benzo bottle. There were seven when he’d found it the other night, before the sting. He doesn’t take or hide it. He doesn’t tell Gabe he knows. But there are six in there, and there remain six for a few weeks. He doesn’t know what will happen when that number gets to zero. He hasn’t even thought about it. They’re getting better. He knows, this time. He can help.

At eleven weeks, he goes for a dating scan. Alone --as if scared of some less recognisable horror. He doesn’t want to be processing it in front of Gabe. It’s too vulnerable. The worst could happen.

But the worst doesn’t happen. Strange shapes tell of the curve of a head. Of limbs, stretching out,
reaching for something. Jack interprets the lines as he sees them --future. Life. It leaves a strange feeling in his chest: as soft and sweet as fontanelle.

He gains three pounds. No matter how he agonises, there is no visible change. It’s almost disappointing.

He shows Gabe the night after --the little picture, with it’s funny lines and weird luck the shape of the child comforting and visible, human and comforting. Theirs. Real, despite the Fear, despite all that he has ever done wrong that could rob him of this virtue.

It happens in bed --somewhere neutral enough. Private. Safe enough to even bring up.

The first thing Gabe says is, “What do we call it?”

They won’t know the sex for a few weeks yet. Maybe that’s not what Gabe is asking, but it makes him smile nonetheless. “Probably not ‘it’.” He says, softly, turning over onto his side. “I feel like this is something we can revisit, when he know a bit more.”

There’s a lull, then, probably of agreement, where neither say anything. Jack leans his neck into his mate’s neck, and Gabe moves his arm around to touch the hardly changed plane of Jack’s stomach. It’s the first time he’s done it, explicitly, purposefully, ad it makes Jack feel cherished in a way he would never normally allow himself.

After a while, Gabe murmurs into him, “I like Ezekiel.”

“Hm?”

“The name,” He explains, softly. “For a boy.”

Jack considers it, for a second. Tastes the name silently in his mouth. “It’s a little mormon.”

With some noise of amusement, Gabe nudges him. “Is it, John?”

Jack nudges right back. “There’s no hurry to decide, you know.” He chides, sleepily. “Could be a girl yet, anyway.” Sleep is overtaking him slowly. The past few weeks have been restless --like he might wake up to find the world has turned, but things feel different now. As if the sonogram alone, hard, unmalleable evidence, is enough to convince him of reality.

His eyes close. He thinks of tomorrow.

And then, for no particular reason, he murmurs, “Cassidy --for a girl. I like that.”
Things are slower, but still --they move.

Debriefing Blackwatch looks to be taking up almost all week, give or take, and that’s between when they’re not filling some of the evidence lockers with the contraband washed up in the Deadlock warehouse. So, despite Jack being in the process of stepping down and taking less action, there follow a few days where they only briefly pass each other before bed.

And while the worst of it seems to be over for Jack: his nausea fades, his energy is slowly returning, and that faint, green-around-the-gills look has cleared up, Gabe finds his mate asleep most nights anyway.

No harm done, really. He slips quietly under the sheets next to Jack and rests, just the same.

There’s a copy of that picture on the bedside --the sonogram, and when he finds he cannot sleep, he takes a few seconds to look at it. To study it, and how all the line and little curves hold something so sacred. A few words float around his head. Ezekiel. Cassidy.

God knows he’s heard that name before somewhere.

He converses with Ana, of all the strange bedfellows, before he gets a chance to talk at any real length with Jack. She sequesters him before lunchtime, as he’s stirring his coffee and thinking about the evidence locker, and the bags upon bags full of lean cocaine shaped into communion wafers -- hosts of them.

She comes around to get her own cup, smiling, without the usual undercurrent that lingers in her gaze. With something else --a busyness that Gabe deems safe. She’s been on better behaviour since the sting, having found no evidence to accuse him further, and finding Jack less and less on her side about the whole thing. It’d be vindicating if deep down, she didn’t have grounds for it.

“Good morning, Gabriel.” She says, with her characteristic certainty, angling her pot to pour.

Impassively, or maybe preemptively defensive, he nods. “Morning.” He murmurs. “Heading to Canada?” It’s not a subtle dig --she’s heading off today at some point to collect Fareeha from her father.

Ana seems to know that, or even if she doesn’t, there’s no affront on her face as she fiddles with a packet of sugar. “In just over an hour actually.” She says, with particular ease. “Speaking of which, I
had something put on your desk for Jack.” As she pours her milk she hesitates. “For both of you, really, but I didn’t think I’d see him before I left.”

Something --something for both of them, but Ana doesn’t say the word gift. Gabe’s mind goes straight to the darkest place he knows, wondering suddenly if somehow Ana has evidence of his every transgression of his, or even just the worst one.

He tries to temper it with his good reason. How could they know? Jesse’s been in custody for a few weeks, now. Gabe doesn’t leave a paper trail.

Trying to sound calm and reasonable, he swallows. “I’ll make sure he gets it.”

Ana nods, curtly, pressing her lips to the cup as if to drink the steam before pulling off as if something else has occurred to her. “Oh, also--” She lowers the cup slightly. “Don’t thank me now for doing your legwork, but I have a candidate in mind to replace Mercer.” She gives him some strange, almost warning look that’s perhaps supposed to be affiliative. “That is, if you don’t mind fishing out of lockup.”

Gabe lifts one shoulder and lets it drop. “Fine by me.” He murmurs. Thinks of some of the more elite paramilitary organisations they’ve infiltrated. Thinks of the stony-faced russian women that he expects when he thinks of the role. Some sharp--shooter, probably with a childhood of training and a plethora of complexes.

Not that it matters. He won’t have Company C take a sweep without help from above --and he doesn’t want it to always be Ana.

She’s by the door, now, anyway, giving him a curt nod. “Jack wasn’t so convinced, but the final say is yours.” Her face draws less serious. She raises her cup to him by way of a parting wave. “I’ll send you the relevant details.”

Then she’s gone --leaving him with two more things on an already full plate, raising more questions than what’s probably good for him. It takes him a few, blank seconds and a few sips of coffee before he can even decide what to do.

That being to cancel the debrief with the next agent and go straight to his office, if only to put his insecurity to bed. And he does, too, stepping quickly through the ever-fresh painted corridors to where he conducts his most official work.

Inside is dark. The light only brightens the room so much. Sealed boxes of case files stand as high as the filing cabinets. His desk itself is a mess of paper --but that paper is being weighed down by something new. Something Gabe himself didn’t put there or ask for. It’s where Ana said it would be, some innocuous white card box with no label or name on it.

Approaching it is almost intimidating. Gabe’s hands feel hot when he takes off the lid.

And then he almost wants to laugh at himself.

There, inside, is the furthest thing from Jesse that Gabe could imagine, and when he thinks back on Ana’s words, he realises just how irrational he was being. What lies in wait for him, and for Jack, is nothing at all sinister or disconcerting: it’s a sleepsuit. Some tiny, royal blue thing, with the overwatch logo embroidered into the left side of the fabric.
It’s been a long time since he’s seen anything for a newborn. It’s so tiny that Gabe thinks it can’t possibly be real.

But it is, and he smiles nonetheless.

It stays with him for at least a few minutes, as he goes to his chair and loads up a slide to look at the documents for Ana’s candidate, one hand swiping at the slide while the other remains feeling over the soft fabric of the onesie absent. His inbox is quieter than it was in weeks prior, but that doesn’t dull the instinctive apprehension at seeing Amari, A in the sender line.

He opens it up and scrolls, smiling all the way to the mugshot.

A boy that slinks just over the 180 cm line, with eyes full of hate and blood in his hair. Christ, he smiles all the way to the name, stamped harsh on the pretty white of the paper. Jesse Cassidy McCree.

And then he isn’t smiling anymore.

In fact, it haunts him all day, and it isn’t until hours later, when Ana is gone, when meetings are over and most of the office lights in the wing are off that Gabe thinks to venture to bed, where Jack is already drowsing over-the-sheets, a book at rest on him, still open at his page.

It’s not all that late. Gabe still has yet to eat, so he brings in the box that Ana’s gift had come in and lays it on the bedside table next to Jack quietly. He’s no real intentions of waking his mate --not now, when there’s so much swirling around his head.

He goes over all that he’s heard of today, from Ana.

She’d spoken about Jesse. She’d said ‘Jack wasn’t so convinced’.

His mind turns to his mate’s absences in the past few days. Delirious, then, with paranoia, he searches through transport records until he finds it. Wednesday’s report; Santa Fe County Prison -- the very same that appears on Jesse’s record.

They’ve met, haven’t they?

He realises it alone in the dark: the meeting, Ana’s gift, and her sudden, benevolent concern in searching for a new Blackwatch operative. Drawing Jack and Jesse together like this, in some strange, staged way.

She knows, doesn’t she? That’s why she’s done this. She knows what Gabe did.

Doesn’t she?

-

It’s a state prison like many others.

And here’s Gabe wishing it were a little nicer.

He can see the grime on the table in the interrogation room before he steps inside. Can see the age in
the glass and the fist on the bar that the handcuffs get chained to. As if this part of the world never really existed --like there was never a gorge or a motel of a ‘No Vac’ sign blinking intermittently. Every time he comes back upon these oddities they seem to have faded or aged some.

Like this place was only every some hallucination or memory, and now it’s fading.

Before he’s even brought in, Gabe keeps thinking he’s catching the strange and enticing air of creosote and sarsaparilla on the air, but every time he seems to find it, it disappears just as quickly.

He’s afraid to face Jesse: but he knows there is no other option for him.

(And he could still save the kid. Could still get him to Mexico --even if it wasn’t how Jesse’d spoken about it, in that hush, dreamlike murmur. He still could.)

They bring him in a few minutes later. Gabe watches from the behind the safety of the anonymous glass. Of how Jesse drags his feet as he walks and how the orange of the jumpsuit he’s wearing makes him look washed out and sickly. His hair looks longer and greasier. He’s maybe even skinnier than when last Gabe saw him.

Bereft of his little red flag, or bandana, Gabe can see a clean-looking tattoo that marks the flesh of the kid’s left arm, perfection marred in its wake. A brand: telling of property. The brace on his knee of the same side tells a similar story.

Worst of all, there’s not a bit of resistance when he’s cuffed to the table. The kid just --just takes it, in a way that feels deeply uncharacteristic. He slumps in his chair, and then, when the door closes and he’s alone in the room, he leans his face on his forearms wearily.

Every cell in Gabe’s body fires with the ache to touch the boy. To trace the familiar planes of his skin. To smell him. He wonders, or his own sake, how close they can get. If Jesse would let him. God knows he hardly deserves the kid’s kindness, after everything. God knows it and Gabe knows it, but there’s still some part of him that hopes --that holds it’s breath as he walks towards the door.

He pauses at it to go over an earlier conversation. Had whipped out his identification to instruct them to cut the feed. Whatever ends up being said or done in that room can’t leave a paper trail --can’t possibly end up in the hands of Ana, or worse: Jack.

That if, if anything is said or done. Gabe can’t begin to imagine what Jesse might do.

But he goes in anyway.

The air is stale inside, and heavy with tension. Jesse’s head tilts, and through the layers of dark hair, Gabe thinks he can see the glint of a pair of eyes. It takes a few seconds for Jesse’s head to properly lift, and as Gabe comes to sit, he finds that the kid has straightened in his chair, his mouth quirking in this undecided line, like he can’t tell if the situation warranted a scowl or a smile.

After an interminable second, the kid settles on a smile.

“Well,” He says, quietly, “If it ain’t my favourite angel, Gabriel.”

It’s the last thing Gabe had anticipated. He watches the kid almost cautiously --how Jesse lifts his chained hands like he’s forgotten about the cuffs and how he winces when they snag. The air is pleasant with his smell --different, somehow, but isn’t that to be expected? These last few weeks
have hopefully seen his body less used.

(Hopefully. Gabe knows what they do to boys like Jesse in places like these. He knows that boys like Jesse usually let them --if it turns a profit.)

Nothing occurs to him to say --which is fine, Jesse always did like to do the talking.

“Always knew you’d come walkin’ back through my door.” He draws, with such confidence that Gabe can honestly believe it --like Jesse’s had him pegged from the very start. “Reckon somethin’ made it inevitable.”

The handcuffs rattle again as he gestures, raising his fingers and looking right at Gabe, knowing, it seems, what Gabe has the power to both do and not do. “Y’wanna help me with these?”

Gabe still doesn’t say anything. How can he? There are now marks on Jesse’s body he put there. God, he should have been clearer. Should have put Jesse on a damn train himself. Should never have got so damn invested --but here he is, and despite it all: the green of Jesse’s face and the ugly brand on his arm or his bleak surroundings, Gabe’s heart peeks out of his eyes merely to see the kid alive.

He can’t give the kid Mexico now --so he does the least he can, reaching over, unlocking the kid’s cuffs to give him a little room to breathe, and setting them on the side of the table.

It earns him some winning smile, with Jesse looking fully at him, his pretty, foxish mouth flashing a few teeth before the kid moves his right hands back jerkily.

And reaching over the table to punch --hard.

It connects, amazingly, and for a few starry moments Gabe can hardly tell of what happens until heat and distant pain blooms up his jaw and he watches the kid shake out the pain that’s likely formed in his own wrist across the table. He sees how Jesse’s face has changed --how his expression is furious and unmalleable and hard, to look as if he’s never smiled in his whole life.

The kid spits, too, some frothy circle landing on the table a few inches from gabe as the kid seethes. “I owed you that.” His mouth draws in smaller after he says that --like he’s going to say something worse but convinces himself out of it. Christ, what else could he say? “Y’think I ain’t learned to hate you yet?!”

He says all that’s been on his mind, every second they’ve been apart. “Jesse--”

This time Gabe sees Jesse’s fist before it can do any real damage. The move is telegraphed --he catches the kid by his wrist in the middle of it’s arc and squeezes in warning, just as Jesse tries to tear his arm away furiously. Never one to be trapped for long.

Bristling, the kid jerks his arm back wildly. “Get your hands offa me!” He yells. “You got some goddamned nerve--”

‘I got some nerve?’ Gabe almost says, before getting the better of it. Knowing it won’t do any good, and Jesse has such hate in his eyes, the likes of which Gabe has barely ever seen before. Instead, he releases his grip, and tries to sound calm when he speaks --tries to sound like he doesn’t want anything more than to relinquish the distance between them. “Kid, for god’s sakes.” He shakes his head. “I told you to leave while you still had the chance--”
That does no good --Jesse sees red. “Y’think you can get off this on a technicality?!” He yells. And he’s really yelling now, too, colour furious in his face. “Yeah, y’did tell me t’leave, just like y’killed Johnny and jus’ like you took everythin’ I thought I had!”

At Johnny’s name, the kid’s voice breaks a little, and that only seems to add to his fury as he powers through his words. It does seem to exhaust him something, though, and then he’s wiping his hands down his face furiously, his voice dropping something awful. “God, you let me believe--”

Gabe has had enough. “I didn’t let you believe anything.” He says, coldly, cutting through Jesse’s spiel. “You knew what you were doing.”

The kid laughs bitterly. Shakes his head without listening at all. “Now I do.” He says. “Y’got no rights to be here. Leave.”

Gabe thinks about the way Jesse looks under neon light. The way his skin feels. How his laughter sounds. Christ, how could this happen? How could he let this happen?

Trying to seem impassive --trying not to show Jesse the entry wound of when and how the kid got under his skin, he says. “Neither of us wanted it to happen like this.” The words are hard to get through. He tires to be like a soldier: as clinical as Jack is, when he needs to be. “If you need to blame me that much, then go ahead, but maybe we can help each other out.”

Jesse laughs again. Shakes his head. He won’t rise to looking Gabe in the eyes. “I think you done enough. Don’t you? Weren’t it enough to put me here?”

Gabe tries to earn the kid’s full gaze. Longs to see it. He feels as if he is the one shackled, forced to sit across from Jesse, to see him as he is and to take in his scent, unable to breach the distance. Unable to offer any tenderness.

He plays an old card. He says. ”I could get you to Mexico.”

Jesse coughs in the back of his throat. Looks at some distant corner of the room. “Where I heard that before?” He mutters. ”Jesus, d’you know what you done to me? To my--”

It comes out before Gabe can think: “I never meant to hurt you, Jesse.”

Another harsh, angry laugh. Jesse looks at him then and looks utterly at a loss. “Well, that’s sweet an’ all, Gabriel.” He says, with some elaborate pantomime of sincerity, folding his hands. ”But I can’t make a life in your ‘good intentions’.” His hands come apart again, filled with energy: nervous, or angry. The kid’s eyes shine dangerously. His voice swells again in volume. “I never asked for your help, y’know. I was fine before you came along--”

Suddenly bitter himself --thinking about that bite mark on Jesse’s leg, or the blood between his thighs, or the way his ribs were countable; thinking about how he was lying there on that bathroom floor, covered in sweat and blood and vomit, barely a pulse, barely alive --it gets to him.

“Tell yourself that.” Gabe says, sharply.

“I do!” The kid’s hands slam on the table. He tries to stand, but can only bring himself up to half of his height, hunched, and furious. “Jesus Christ. Johnny might not a’ been the holy ghost, gonna take me over the rainbow, don’t y’think I know that?!” He spits, voice tapering off at the end a little as if he’s becoming sorrier for the thought by the second. “Maybe Johnny weren’t a good man,” The kid
says, a hand coming up to his face again. “But he was my man.”

Gabe is witness to it all --the way Jesse’s eyes flare when he says it. The harsh rise and fall of his chest like the mere conversation takes his everything from him. And then there can be no doubt about what kind of tragedy Gabriel knows this to be now. Jesse loved him, didn’t he? Despite it all: even with that gun under his chin, Jesse would have taken a bullet for Johnny Ringo.

Now the kid is slumped back in his seat, worn to the bone, reckless and tired with his own misery. “Now’s he’s in the goddamned ground with the worms, an’ I’m here.” He spits. “But thank goodness for your good goddamn intentions.”

It appears that Jesse’s said his piece, then, what with the way he breathes hard, and looks back down at the table. His mouth comes to a close, in some grim line. He looks so...bereft. Almost careless with it. As if there’s nothing else he’s afraid of losing, anyway, so this conversation doesn’t matter.

Gabe aches to kiss Jesse, then --aches all the way down to the marrow of his goddamn bones.

But he doesn’t say that. Instead, he reaches across the table slowly, as if not to startle the kid, reaching his hand gentle. Their fingers brush. Jesse doesn’t resist the touch.

“I’m sorry, kid.” Gabe says, solemnly.

Jesse sniffs. Lifts his head and looks away. “You’re what?” he asks, in a thick voice.

Gabe doesn’t press too much further. Doesn’t reach to envelop Jesse’s hand with his, despite how much he wants to. If things were his way, he’d be holding Jesse. (But, then, if things were his way, a lot of things would be different.)

It’s enough to merely nod, and say, “I’m sorry, Jesse. You know I am.”

The kid sniffs again. Twitches his fingers, and maybe it’s incidental, but it causes them to touch again. Lifting his head, Jesse tries some faint, watery smile. “Guess I can believe that.” He says, tiredly. “Y’got a cigarette? I’m gaspin’.”

Gabe draws his other hand back to pat himself down, but Christ, now he thinks about it, the last time he’s smoked at all was with Jesse. He doesn’t do it much around base --he ‘quit’ with Jack all those years ago and now doesn’t have the heart to get fully caught, even if he knows Jack knows. He doesn’t have a carton on him. There’s on shoved into the back of his locker. That’s it.

Feeling guiltier for this than anything else, Gabe’s hand come away from his body emptily. “I don’t.” he says, apologetically.

The kid lifts a shoulder passively. The movement is small, like he’s tired. God knows he’s got every right to be. “S’probably for the best, anyway.” He jokes. His head drops again and he looks up with the face of somebody ten years the kid’s senior, lined, exhausted. “What d’you want, anyway, Gabriel?”

Gabe hates that sentence. Like he’s some other client. The only people that have existed in the kid’s life have demanded something --have taken something, and he really thought--...really had himself fooled that he was different.

He tries to be. Gives a good enough performance to say, “I want to help you --if I can.” the kid’s
eyebrows raise contemptuously, but he doesn’t say anything further. “I need some answers, first.”

Again, there’s no protest. That’s a green light as any he’s going to get today.

“You’ve had some visitors, as I understand it.” He begins, carefully. He keeps his tone tempered so as not to betray his fear. There’s no telling how deep Ana’s actions go. If they’re thinly-veiled threats or hideous, cosmic ironies. “Just over a week ago?”

Jesse’s mouth opens and shuts. “Sure.” he says, after a moment. “Some Commander. Prettyboy -- y’know the kind I mean.”

Gabe’s mouth twitches. His voice remains impartial. “I know the kind you mean.”

The kid shifts. “Was askin’ about Deadlock. Wanted to know if I could shoot. That kinda bull.” He looks distinctly uncomfortable, like he fears a cruel joke is being played on him. It’s surprising. Jack was always supposed to be the diplomat. The friendly one. It figures.

The thought of Jack only makes his jaw feel tighter. “They ask you about me?”

Jesse shakes his head.

It isn’t good enough. “You tell them about me?”

“Nobody even mentioned your goddamned name.” Jesse says, then --comes out of him sort of suddenly, and gives some idea of the vitriol that’s only beneath the surface of his fatigue. “It’s like I said --he only asked me about my shootin’.”

Gabe thinks about Ana again. Is somehow relieved --but not entirely. “And what did you tell them?” He asks, with some genuine curiosity.

Jesse shrugs again. “It’s been a while, but I always was a good shot.” he looks proud for all of a second --a glorious golden second, where he looks young again, like he used to, in his element, sprawled in his sheets, commanding the attention of every room in the world if only in his own way. But it doesn’t later, and then Jesse’s pupils shrink in some distant fear. “S’this about --about that man I killed?”

The hand Gabe still has across the table makes some bold move to reach for Jesse’s --and the surprise grants him a second or implicit permission to squeeze, a he looks the kid in the eyes and promises, “It’s not about that. I’m not here to gather evidence against you.”

Jesse looks at him. Swallows. The skin of his hand is cold in Gabe’s grasp.

“I’m gonna get you out of here.” Gabe says --promises it. Knows it, even if he doesn’t know how.

The kid pulls back. “Don’t.” He says, wounded, as if the very prospect hurts him. “Don’t you lie to me.”

Gabe’s done a lot of awful things to a lot of awful people. But he’s never lied --not to Jesse.

(Not unless a lie of omission counts.)

“I mean it.” Gabe says, then, more earnest now, and desperate to be heard, “It’s not Mexico, but you
wouldn’t have to—"

Jesse slams his fist down onto the table again. “I said don’t, awright!?” He looks furious with turmoil, losing that streak of sudden lightning, softening to a melancholy sort of softness. “I -- I killed one a’ your men. I-I done--…” Jesse covers his eyes again for a second. “Christ, I done so much shit. How y’gonna wipe my record away, huh? Y’gonna bust me outta here?”

Gabe does his best not to look affected at all. Tried some professionalism, if he’s got any left in him to say, “I have the jurisdiction, kid.” He says, “Maybe I can’t get you to Mexico yet, but I could give you a way out of this.” He looks up again and tries to capture Jesse’s attention. An eternal struggle. “A fresh start. A clean record.”

Jesse snorts. “What’s the catch?” He asks, out of the side of his mouth. And then, after a second of silence, he presses. “I weren’t born yesterday, Gabriel. What’s the catch?”

Gabe matches him for tone. “No catch.” As serious as a heart attack. “It’s just a job.”

“What?”

He repeats himself. “It’s a job.” Thinking of Blackwatch, he tries to chose his words carefully. To sound out the appeal of what he’s saying. “You had years of experience with Deadlock’s ins and outs. Makes you a pretty valuable asset.”

The kid scoffs again. Shakes his head. “Yeah, that’s the reason--”

“I mean it.” It’s easy to cut the kid off. He’s not the only one who’s tired. “A couple of weeks, max, and you’ll never have to see this place again.”

That catches the kid’s attention. Knocks that sceptical look right off of his face, and then Jesse draws back and looks away as if he’s hearing the words, properly, for the first time. His mouth opens and closes as if he’s unsure of what he could possibly say. It doesn’t last forever, and then Jesse looks back at him, no more derisive as much as in disbelief. “And I’d be--I’d be free to come an’ go, as I liked?”

Gabe nods. “You’d be under my watch.” He says, carefully, trying to sound benevolent. “And nobody’d be taking advantage of you here.”

The kid’s eyebrow’s raise again in some old throwback of confidence. “‘Cept you, maybe--”

“It’s not like that.” Gabe says, sharply --trying to get it out as quickly as possible. “It--it can’t be.” Then his tongue gets caught in the barbed wire snare of his jaw and he can barely speak to think about it. His brain says, Jack-Jack-Jack and he knows he has to give some kind of warning. “If it comes to light that I had any involvement with you besides you dealing for me before, they’ll put you back here and there’ll be nothing I can do about it.” he says it in some grave tone --serious as he can muster. “Not a thing. You understand?”

Jesse shrugs a shoulder, blandly. “I get it,” he says, coolly. “Besides, what they don’t know--”

Gabe’s turn to raise his voice, for the first time --it flaring in his throat before he can get the better of it. “This isn’t a fucking joke!” He growls, all the while his head is pounding: Jack-Jack-Jack. “Do you know what a conflict of interest is? What it could cost me?”
Entirely unafraid, Jesse doesn’t flinch—he bristles. “Well, you sure changed your tune since you was between my legs.” he says. It’s nasty enough —threatening enough that it silences Gabe. Then the remark lands and they can both sense the damage of it.

He recalls red on white. The tiny, essential point of a needle. A pulse so faint that it sounded like dissipating, faraway rain.

“That was different.” Is all he says. His tone is softer with surrender, begging of mercy, and then being denied it as Jese smirks further, feeling clumsily for a wound to pick.

And he finds one, too.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it’s different.” He says, haughtily. “Somethin’ got you running scared, Gabriel? Or someone?” With a cant of the head, Jesse smiles, then, and not the cute kind. Wolfish. Dangerous. “That mark don’t half look fresh.”

Gabe scowls. “Cut the shit.” He grinds out. He feels as exposed as a white blood cell under a microscope. He wishes he’d worn a higher collar.

Jesse levels with him. “You first.”

They’re not going to get anywhere today. Gabe knows it—he’s known it since Jesse first raised his voice, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to leave then. Felt like maybe they needed to get even again, or maybe it’s just that he’s missed the way Jesse’s mouth when he talks, no matter how awful or pleasing the thing he’s saying is. Not that it matters: he can’t do anything for right now. And God knows if he should.

Doing right by the kid is one thing.

Bringing him to Jack, where all those suspicions lie, and where loose lips sink ships; well, that’s entirely another thing.

He needs air. How can he possibly breathe in here, when every breath, it’s like he’s breathing in the kid all over again. Letting Jesse make a home in his chest? How can he think?

It’s quiet, he realises. He takes the handcuffs back, feeling suddenly numb. “I’m going to give you some time.” He decides upon, eventually. He stands.

The look he gives Jesse is an instruction as he wields the handcuffs once more. Jesse’s wrists present themselves. He gets it.

“I’ll be here.” The kid hums, with some bleak humour, as he watches himself become once more chained to the table. Gabe is merciful enough to leave him some breathing room around the wrists. He thinks he entered the room in love. He doesn’t know what he feels.

He goes to depart, then, willing himself to let go of the metal of the cuff.

Yet, the moment he does, a pair of fingers reach out and grasp his sleeve hard in some quick, sudden movement of desperation.

Jesse looks up at him. “You’ll come back for me.” He says. It’s unclear if it’s a question or not until the kid swallows. His eyes look fearful. Gone from them is the brief confidence of before, or the
anger. He looks just as he did when he as coming around from the naloxone. “You will.”


All from the kid who has never gotten anything he’s asked for in his entire life.

So Gabe moves his hand. Drops it, a little, until he’s holding the kid’s. There’s no resistance to the movement. It’s a strange and tender thing: the way he moves his thumb softly, stroking it across the dusky plane of Jesse’s skin like he’s trying to soothe a wild animal that’s unwilling to be tamed. How he longs to do something more, but can only find the boldness to squeeze Jesse’s hand some more.

They look right at each other. Gabe has had sex that has felt exposing --less intimate.

“I’ll come back for you.” He nods, then, sure of it now.

It’s the last thing he gets to say. And then he’s gone.

There are parts you keep. Parts you change, or cover up, or throw away.

That’s foundational in a relationship.

And whatever Gabe felt in that room, with Jesse --whatever he’s ever felt for the kid: that’s the thing he amputates in order to face Jack.

Jack’s schedule is clearing, little by little, and it’s coupled with a miraculous shift in the world. Nightly news talks about the bust in some golden light that the organisation hasn’t seen in a good while. It makes the headlines --Jack gets his picture on a few front pages. There’s a think piece floating around about ‘Overwatch: outgrowing it’s mythology?’ and it points to Jack as some patron saint of it all. Gabe only knows because he sees the slide open in Jack’s office.

He slips into Jack’s morning shower a few days later, when there’s no other company men to debrief and he’s free until the afternoon. The water is scaldingly hot. It takes him a little while to get used to it, and by then, his front is plastered to his back and he’s jerking Jack off under the jet, his other hand lingering on Jack’s hip after being dismissed from his mate’s heavy, sensitive chest.

It’s summer, again, though. Or just about.

It feels like it: some invincible springtime of their lives. There are four benzos left in the bottle in the bathroom. But even still, they talk.

And when they’re not talking, they’re doing something more. It becomes a series of post-it notes when they miss each other. Jack is the first to be left on, on the pillow besides him as he wakes. He knows Gabe’s handwriting with a warm familiarity: each confident, straight-line stroke of the letters.

‘Cassidy
Annie?’

There are several of these that go in circles. Jack had been settled on Cassidy, truth be told. He doesn’t know why.
The time continues to pass. Exciting, for once. The world looks upon him favourably. He gains another two pounds. His symptoms ease.

He keeps Ana’s gift—the little blue onesie, in its box, in the bottom drawer of his desk. The fabric is soft and comforting. It seems to soothe his nerves and give way to something like nostalgia when he feels it in his fingers. So he keeps it where he needs it most.

Ana returns from Canada a week after she’d left. She appears in the hangar with Fareeha, the sweet, bright girl, who remembers to thank Jack for his help her martial arts, and shows him her tournament trophy (first place), and congratulates him sweetly on his pregnancy. It stays on his mind for days. He looks at her, differently, now.

But it’s summer again, and the yard is full of tiny flowers.

Weeds, Jack thinks. He culls them with Fareeha and Ana on an afternoon Gabriel isn’t around. They clear the lot if only to stop them from growing too tall, and he works away happily. Because it shouldn’t matter if Gabriel goes out again to New Mexico. It shouldn’t matter that suddenly there are suddenly only 2 pills left in his bottle.

He digs and pulls. There’s only ever a momentary concern about the strain of it. At the time, he’s only thinking about if it should rain. A gunmetal gray sky hangs above, threatening to precipitate—warning of it, but never quite finding the nerve.

Jack enjoys the act of it—the sensation of wrenching up from the root. Clearing the shameless dandelions that have propagated all over the vegetable patch, showing off, stealing sunlight. Furiously golden.

He enjoys it until a wide, pulling sort of ache spreads across the lower part of his abdomen.

It does not occur to him to worry until later. He’s celebrating a win that day.

And Jack does not yet realize that, when celebrating a win, the universe is usually very quick to get even.
Chapter Notes

this is the saddest it gets. pinky promise.
apologies in advance for typos or weird formatting. I wrote this all on a phone.

look at this amazing art, too!
https://twitter.com/AiFungii/status/887809697860001795

Gabe is just over the border when his comm pings.

Not Jack, but Ana. And she only ever inevitably calls about Jack.

He takes the call as he is, there alone in the air, with nothing but a carton of cigarettes that aren’t even for him as his only protection. There’s no divine providence, or some deep, cosmic feeling of wrongness. If anything, slight fear or annoyance. Wondering if he’s wandered into Ana’s snare unknowingly. If it’s all about to end.

It’s graphite-grey outside. Threatening to rain, or maybe even storm. There’s enough pressure in the air.

Gabe should trust his feelings more.

He answers in a neutral, guarded tone. Prepared, as always for the strange, oppressive brand of management.


“It’s Jack.” She says. Her voice is soft with sincerity. With genuine worry. He only knows because he’s heard it a few times before, and those were years ago. When Jack was restless and the world was ending and there was no time for animosity among the wreckage. Just those two words take him all the way back.

Gabe swallows, sharply.

He says, “What?”

Ana doesn’t waste her words. “It’s Jack.” She says, full of haste --pleadingly, as if there’s anything Gabe can do right now. “Re-route your transport.”

Reflexively, he says, “Okay.” He doesn’t even think to argue. “Okay.” He says, again, even though he’s never much liked the word. “Is he okay?”

“I think so.” She says. It’s unlike her to express uncertainty. Uncharacteristic: Ana’s a decisive woman who always knows which side of the gun she’s on --unless something really troubles her. To hear it --to think about Jack, far away from him, makes Gabe feel enmeshed in the body of the
transport. As if incarcerated for his crimes. “Be quick.”

There’s only so fast they can go --a fixed swathe of land between him and Grand Mesa already. Yet, still, he says, “I will be.” And means it, too.

He doesn’t even think about Jesse as he re-routes them. Just like, once upon a time, he hadn’t been thinking about Jack, out in the vast red rock. There had been a conflict, then, not dissimilar to this, between the kid and his mate: Jack’s imminent heat, and leaving Jesse alone on his birthday.

In the past, whenever that conflict arose, Jesse won.

But everyone takes turns. And now it’s Jesse’s turn to lose.

-  

It’s less than an hour later that he’s stumbling back through well-known halls.

Punctual, this time. Present, for once.

He wishes that he’d been summoned to their bedroom instead of the infirmary --a windowless, voidlike room that has only ever seen bad news for the both of them. He hates that he knows the cracks in the tiles so well from looking elsewhere --anywhere but Jack when bloodtests came back negative. Hates that he knows all of the posters, meant as a distraction to patients, with their friendly looking skeletons and meningitis cartoons and the graceful, elegant curve of the swell of the fontanelle of an illustrated fetus on the far wall, eyes closed, at some peaceful rest and ever blithely unaware of the pain it causes.

It’s still there, obscured by a the shape of Ana as she stands in the middle of the room that Gabe peers inside of. He does it before he dares enter. A glance: less than a second, if only to prepare himself.

But there is some mercy. Inside are no tears. No tense, unaltering silences.

He should be grateful, yet the unfamiliarity of the scene renders him frightened. It isn’t neutral territory. He has no way to guard himself.

Jack isn’t visible to him until he steps inside. In his whole life, Gabe has seldom been gladder to see his mate than then. Their eyes meet immediately, and Gabe looks as if to seek to detect Jack’s feeling. Sensitive to hurt. To loss. God knows they’re familiar enough with it.

It’s not what he finds.

Jack looks --well, nervous mostly. He’s perched on an examination able, but purely as a seat. He leans back on one hand. The other hesitates over his stomach. Brazen, for Jack, who is usually so very private. Is it sentimentality? A red flag? Gabes looks to another face for answers.

Ana steps back as if to give him some room. She must realise how her presence changes the tone of the scene. How it leaves to Gabe’s hands wringing because he still doesn’t like to touch Jack much under her gaze, as if scrutinised, like every move is incorrect.

She says, “I’ll give you a moment.”
Gabe nods to her sharply: a warning that his fear is becoming impatient. “Thanks.”

Her shoes shuffle quietly across the floor. In less than a second, she is gone, but Gabe gives a moment of grace to be sure that they’re alone --to be certain of it, before he comes forward in some great hurry. The dam bursts, so to speak. He embraces Jack with a desperate sort of tenderness, squeezing hard, taking in as much of his mate’s scent as he can.

Jack doesn’t seem at all surprised by it, if the way his hand comes up softly to rub the plane of Gabe’s spine is anything to go by. There’s no hidden resistance to it.

No hurt.

It’s no certainty, though, and Gabe realises how out of breath he is only when he pulls away slightly to try to get words out. ”Is everything alright?” He asks, looking fully at Jack, almost owlishly. “Ana said--”

“It’s nothing.” Jack’s head tilts like he wants to look away for a second, though their eye contact does not break. It looks enough like honesty. “I thought --I had some pain. I thought it might be serious.” His voice sounds so matter-of-fact about it, like he’s over it, and Gabe feels both comforted, and unconvinced. “It was only slight.”

He looks his mate over as if looking for signs of injury. Over the years, they’ve both gotten good at it. “Are you--”

Jack’s hand on his shoulder presses as if he’s physically trying to ground Gabe. The whole situation feels so very surreal, and it’s due in no small part due to their positions. Isn’t Gabe supposed to be a presence of comfort? Wasn’t Jack always the one to panic?

Apparently not. Jack’s expression is sage and measured, almost like he’s trying, when he says, “The attending physician said that it was probably a ligament pain.” They’re not his words. Maybe that’s what he’s so comforted by: the notion of a kinder world. Jack is rarely so kind to himself. “Apparently, I shouldn’t be worried if it happens again without any other symptoms.”

Again, Jack’s voice is steady. Gabe can’t tell how much of it is sincere, and how much of it is practise. It would crush Jack like a small bug if anything were to happen, and even the mere hypothetical is enough to make Gabe feel vaguely sick. His brain rejects the notion. His thumb brushes Jack’s jaw shyly.

“What about your specialist?” He says, quietly. “Doesn’t hurt to have a second opinion.”

Jack smiles faintly at that. Something in his expression says ‘great minds’. “I already called.” He says. His body wilts a little so he’s sort of leaning on Gabe’s shoulder. “She said the same thing, but I organised an appointment for next week, anyway.”

It must be ticklish to be that close to Gabe’s mouth when he murmurs, “Next week?” Jack smiles again. The impression of it travels right along Gabe’s shoulder. He adores it. Tries to joke, if only to extend the lifespan of the expression. “When did you loosen up?”

“She’s in Muskegon with another patient.” Jack says. He shakes his head, self-deprecatingly. “Don’t
worry. I still prefer tightly-wound.” his smile fades a little in the short silence that follows, like he’s trying to consider his words, and it’s only in that moment that Gabe catches sight of the fear that Jack is still trying to hide. It’s in the edges of his eyes: something a lens tends to blur, or miss entirely. “But she, uh --she did say the same thing.”

Having noted the fear, Gabe presses. “Which is?”

“No to be concerned about it unless it gets more persistent.” Jack shrugs, impassively. “And to try and take it easy.” He looks away as if not to give Gabe the benefit of an easy ‘i told you so’. “Light duty for now. Doctor’s orders.”

Gabe does like to be right, but also knows that it can wait. There’s no particular hurry to it, and frankly, he’s just relieved that for once, the news in this room is good. There’s still some tension in Jack, but there’s no harm in proceeding with caution. That much they’re both liable to agree on.

Instead of anything smart, Gabe squeezes Jack’s shoulder affectionately. “What about now?” He murmurs, trying not to let his own latent concern show. “Are you still feeling--”


Gabe laughs with him. “That why you’re so calm?”

It’s an easy jab to make, but probably necessary. Jack can stand to hear it, and does, with some quiet laugh. "Maybe," He says, evenly. "Think it's more likely to do with Ana being on my case. Like I don't know about the effects of stress."

"Maybe she just wants your job." Gabe jokes, even if he half-means it.

All the same, Jack laughs. "She can have it." He says, simply. "She's going to have to, for a little while."

In earnest, Jack smiles in full again, and turns his head. He’s been moving closer during the conversation. Their chests are flush against eachother. There’s something incredibly stilling about the faint sensation of his mate’s heart beating.

The beat of it remains the steadiest thing on earth when Gabe smiles, "Never thought retirement would suit you."

It’s apparently the last word, because Jack doesn’t seem to have a witticism ready, and so he just stays there, quietly.

Truthfully, Jack is considering asking about the last two pills left. About New Mexico.

But he’s beaten to the punch when Gabe’s hand drops from his shoulder and brushes the merest swell of Jack’s stomach, modest as it is. “You scared me, Jack.” He whispers, gently. With enough vulnerability that Jack thinks maybe he can learn to let the little things go.

The gesture does it. Jack never does ask. He merely drops his head against Gabe’s neck and takes in the scent of his mate. “I scared me, too.” he jokes.

It never does rain that afternoon. It remains oppressively cloudy for days.
But it does rain eventually, one way or another.

The sky opens on some Tuesday morning.

Jack is alone with his obstetrician when it happens. They talk over the slight, pulling pain of last week that he’s frankly forgotten: about his dwindling morning sickness, the end to his first trimester, the excitement of the future. He mentions the gift Ana had given him. He smiles.

Jack had missed was the empty benzodiazepine bottle in the bathroom cabinet this morning.

And the faint tinge of blood in the toilet water.

Rain flecks the windows. The yard is clear of dandelions. The obstetrician offers to do another ultrasound. ‘I’m not worried’, she says, ‘but it’s just for peace of mind’.

There is silence for a long time after things have been set up. Her next words are ‘I’m sorry’.

At first, there is a beautiful moment where Jack doesn’t understand. He lifts his head and doesn’t think to panic. Doesn’t think to worry. He’s been here before, in this room and situation, where he was told everything looked perfect, and that before January arrived, he’d have met his child.

He doesn’t understand what she’s sorry about. That, perhaps, there’s a problem with one of the instruments, or the machine itself? That the baby, in its obscure detail, on the tiny screen, doesn’t seem to be doing much of anything?

Jack will one day wish he had not been looking. That, in the future, he could picture his child as a pink-cheeked, happy baby that he had been promised, and not the shape of one just -- just lying there, limply, on the bottom of his uterus.

The obstetrician says ‘I’m sorry’ and Jack is fine until the very moment he realises what she is apologising for.

It is quiet for a long time. Jack doesn’t know how long. The moment it dawns upon him, he loses all perception of time. Feels the world shifting again, splitting into two, and the road he is supposed to take veers away from him under his helpless sight. Jack isn’t supposed to be in that room. The baby on the screen isn’t supposed to look like that. You shouldn’t be reading this.

The road he’s supposed to take veers off in that moment, and he already knows; there’s no way back to it.

The next thing the obstetrician says is that it isn’t his fault.

And Christ, it hadn’t even occurred to Jack that it could be. But then it does -- it occurs to him, and his mind races. What did he do? What did he do wrong? How could he have let this happen?

At some point before he has realised it, the machine is turned off. The screen is now a full, resting black: the end of the movie. Jack never gets to see how it ends. He never gets to say goodbye. His obstetrician gives him a cup of plastic water. She says, ‘i’m sorry’ again.

Jack says it, too.
But not to her.

- 

At some point, later, he has to call Gabriel.

Jack can’t cry. He can’t. The best he can do is whimper, and it’s all he can seem to do, holding the comm in both hands, trembling.

The first thing he says is, ‘I’m sorry’.

Gabe knows from that. Always was quicker on the uptake. Always was more sensitive to tone.

He asks, though, doesn’t he? Just has to, if only to clarify, and Jack resents it because he can’t find a single way he knows how to say it in a way that sits right with him.

The form says ‘miscarriage’. Jack has only heard the word a few times in his life. He won’t use it. He despises it already.

How it makes him sound as if he were holding his baby all wrong. Like a mistake he has made --that he didn’t love enough, that he didn’t always take the right vitamins or drink enough water and that’s why. But what are his alternatives?

He wants to tell Gabe something. But saying ‘I lost the baby’ feels like some great lie to him --like there’s a possibility it might return. Like he was a terrible enough father to misplace a child inside of himself.

But all he can say is ‘I’m sorry’.

The word ‘death’ is never mentioned. Gabriel gets it, eventually. Does the crying for the both of them, even if the word is never said. Jack tries to say it --God knows he does, but only gets as far as whispering, “T-the baby--...”

But it wasn’t a baby yet, really; was it?

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Fourteen weeks fits the criteria for a ‘late miscarriage’.

That’s what it’s officially known as. Jack will later find out that less than two percent of pregnancies end this way. All he knows in the moment is that his is among their number.

He’s supposed to be fifteen weeks, too, approaching the milestone of the first feelings of movement and life. But he’d miscarried a full week before the appointment. The life inside of him had ended -- there would never be any movement or flutterings, and he had been none the wiser to it. Oblivious. It takes another person to tell him.

Jack can’t stop wondering which is worse: the thought of death, inside of him, or the time. The fact that he spent the last week like this, gleefully going about his life without knowing at all. Touching his stomach tentatively. Writing potential names on post-it notes. Like a suddenly-disconnected phonecall in which he kept talking.
How awful that he should have spent the last week saying ‘i love you’ over and over again; and to
dead silence, no less, yammering away like an idiot. There would never be a reply.

There’s no chance of a natural delivery, either, thing being what they are. The baby has been dead
long enough. Jack goes in for the procedure three hours after he gets the news.

Anaesthesia is administered. He feels no less in pain. Jack remembers closing his eyes.

And nought more.

(Things he could have done to cause this:

He had a coffee. He didn’t eat enough. One night he took a tylenol. He exercised too much. He
exercised too little. He wondered what kind of father he would make. He smiled too many times;
laughed too hard.

He wanted it too much.)

Outside, Gabe waits with his head in his hands.

It’s one thing not to have hope for something. To be able to shrug your shoulders at loss.

It’s another to have replaying scenes for years --to have indulged privately in the idea of houses,
birthdays: plans. It had never occurred to Gabe that this was something he could lose. That the
sleepsuit might remain in a box at the bottom of a drawer for the rest of their lives.

If you know what it is, to hope, right until the last minute: to have no suggestion of doubt in your
mind about something, and watch it slip through your fingers as helplessly and suddenly as a
landslide, then you know the numbness of Gabe, in that hallway.

And if you do not, then you can’t possibly imagine it.

At some point, when his head feels bleary like he’s been thumping it against a wall, he hears
footsteps stir in the hall and fears, for a second, that it’s one of the medical staff. That he’ll have to
face Jack like this: his eyes shining, his face sallow and gaunt, the image of grief. He looks up and
tries to right himself.

Finding only Ana: he cannot say if this changes his mood at all.

She says nothing. She takes a few steps closer and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, Gabriel,” He hears --a mere whisper.

He doesn’t know if he hallucinates the embrace that comes next or not. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t
even matter that it’s Ana. gabe feels it, and then realises he’s clinging back, hard. Stiff and silent. Too
proud to be wounded before her, but desperate enough to seek some comfort.
He wants to tell her he’s sorry. That he should have been there more, or done something, or changed things somehow.

But he never does.

No difference can be made now.

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Jack is granted the mercy of a twilight sleep, at least.

It is many hours until he comes around. Lost, at first, feverish with drugs, expecting to find his own bed. Having forgotten for one brief and shining second, about everything after he had risen that morning. His eyes blink lazily and he indulges himself the thought of the day like it were any other.

Gabe is there to watch the recollection. The way Jack’s eyes start to open fully.

They look at one another. Jack had looked at peace in rest. Gabe looks harrowed. His eyes are bloodshot. His face is drawn.

They say nothing to one another. Jack wants to say he’s sorry. Gabe wants to say it, too. It’s for the best when he moves towards the mattress pad and climbs under the sheet.

Jack’s body is colder than he expects. It feels unfamiliar, somehow, to pull his mate into him, and yet, entirely necessary. There’s no resistance. Jack has yet to fully cry, and maybe it’s just that he’s coming around from the drugs or maybe it’s finally hitting him. But the moment he is pressed into the crook of Gabe’s neck, and the moment he hears Gabe utter, “It wasn’t your fault.”

Something breaks.

Maybe it’s just the sudden feeling of emptiness: bereft of life within him, or the way Gabe looks and sounds: small, like a lifetime on the head of a pin, crushed like a small bug. Maybe it’s the blood in the sheets, now: the only remnants that this was ever more than a fever dream.

It takes Jack eleven hours from hearing the news to cry.

Once he starts, it is almost as if he cannot stop, and these childish, knifelike gasps from breath come up out of him once he has begun. His eyes squeeze themselves shut in refusal to look at this world, and he buries himself into Gabe if only to keep himself quiet. The feeling alone makes him sick to his stomach.

There’s blood drying on his thighs. A pain in his stomach is reminiscent of last week and only now, like this, does he know to associate it with loss. He keeps trying to grasp his old delusions of what their baby might look like. The image he’d conjured when he first thought of a Cassidy: dark, curly hair and high cheeks and sticky fingers are lost to him.

Jack wants to find his way back to her. He wants to say goodbye, but Christ, he can only see that miserable image of the baby, lying there, at the bottom of the screen. Even with his eyes closed, it’s all he sees.

Gabe holds him through it. Maybe he’s done crying, by the way he remains still and salient in the sheets besides Jack. He holds Jack tightly, too, as if afraid to let go, and surrender him to the
recognisable horror of the world now --their world, devoid as it is of light.

It's after hours like that --hours, that Jack finally finds his voice. A train--wreck, barely solid, only the outer casing of words.

"Gabe," He sniffs, quietly; defeated. Parts of him are still untethered from the painkillers. "I --I'm sorry, Gabe," His voice trembles. "I'm so sorry--..."

He keeps repeating himself. It doesn't matter none of it does. They have run out of things to say. There are no more poetic ways to speak of loss. There are no more ways to speak at all. All they can give each other is old words. Jack continues to ramble: he's sorry, he's so sorry, and all the while, Gabe rocks him gently and promises him, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not--..."

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There will be no handover to Ana, now.

Which is why Jack is the one in the firing line when the news breaks --not two days later, in the early hours of the morning. He's alerted immediately by private comm and it stirs him, as he'd been, almost asleep on his side, still bleeding, pain still low and sharp in his stomach.

Thirty miles outside of Albuquerque. A hypertrain carrying some civilians, alongside covert munition stockpiles. Jack reads 'thirty-seven dead, seventy-seven gravely wounded' before he even gets to the how: purloined tech. An small-radius explosive that had been trialled maybe a month back by a small branch of government, manufactured on a miniscule scale.

The stockpiles were taken. A bridge destroyed. People dead, and all the hands of what seem to be Deadlock, or at least their remnants.

Barely weeks ago, Jack had been standing before the press, assured in the arrogance of victory, speaking easily about the defeat of domestic terrorism the modern age. About having much less to fear. About the safety of those nearby. He'd spoken with such confidence --some secret glee of knowing this was the last thing he'd ever have to do as a public figure. He knew what the dissolution of Deadlock meant to public safety: and even more to his own future.

How many who had been listening died? How many more listening had lived to see this?

Enough that the news start pouring in minutes later. Most report the news. Some count the dead.

All demand a statement from Overwatch regarding the situation: and demand answers from Jack.

What can he say? Just as the rest of them, he'd thought the worst was over. That they were safe. And now there are bodies filling a morgue in New Mexico down to nothing more than pride and bad intel. There are no words he can use to defend that: no excuse that will bring anyone a semblance of comfort or peace.

But he has to say something.

Ana tells him that much: some private counsel, heavy on his shoulder, but doing the talking. “I know this is the last thing you want to do.” She murmurs to him, an arm over his shoulder, concern softening her voice. “God knows you’ve lost enough.”
Gabriel watches from the door. His face is still ashen with grief. His arms are crossed over his body, looming like a shadow, ready to step in at any moment.

“If you’re not the one to face them,” She continues, morose. “They’ll crucify you, Jack.”

What an empty threat. What an assumption that he can care for loss, right now. Jack knows he should heed her words, but can’t quite make himself.

His shoulder shrug. His mouth is dry. “When?” He murmurs, lifting his head. He hears Gabriel shift in the door, defensive, resistant to the idea of Jack being lead to the slaughterhouse.

Ana looks up at him. Then away. “An hour. They’ve already prepared a statement for you.”

“You don’t have to do this.” Gabe interjects, then. His voice sounds stiff, and ironically, compassionless.

It’s with some sharp look that Ana gives Gabe when she agrees, although, not with any ease. “Nobody’s going to make you.” She says, very deliberately. “It’s your choice.”

But they all know; it was never his choice, really. Jack knows his hands are tied.

An hour later, Jack goes to give a statement.

Gabe promises to fix things.

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He spends seventeen hours at the Santa Fe County lockup the next day.

The last thing he does is face Jesse.

He pours over the arrest records and previously garnered interrogation data, identifying key players in the Deadlock heirachy --those who would have the means and motive to try this. Those who would gain. Was it pre-empted? Planned before they were put in handcuffs --some key detail Gabe failed to spot? Too caught up, as he’d been, with other things.

Despite himself, he looks to see how costly this will be for them, in the long run, curious and fearful at headlines. Some of which point out that poise and dignity of Jack and his statement: clinging to comfort in the belief that his wisdom could still save them all.

Most call for his removal, questioning the use of Overwatch in the post-crisis age.

Gabe hadn’t thought they’d anything else that could be taken.

His interrogations seem to point to the bunny ranch Jesse had mentioned off-handedly, where more unofficial business is conducted. The last one Gabe had interrogated --some nervous-wreck of a blonde beta, had been reluctant to share as much until the business end of a hammer met the kuckle of his thumb. Then, the trick had been getting the guy to keep quiet.

That’s on the seventeenth hour. Not all men surrender their information so easily. And the longer it takes, the crueller Gabe becomes. He damn near has no compassion left. No energy for it, anymore.
Tired to the point of breaking, but scared to come away empty-handed, he requests to see Jesse if only to pretend. To imagine it’s months earlier, and that which doesn’t yet exist can’t hurt him, yet. Always was something calming about listening to the kid just talk. God knows he won’t ask about Jack. Or the baby. He knows so little of any of it. Gabe could use the mercy.

And he owes the kid anyway, doesn’t he?

So he calls the kid to be taken to an interrogation room; though, not before he trades cash with one of the prison guards for a mostly-full carton of cigarettes. The brand is unfamiliar to him, and they look cheap. But the gesture is there, all the same.

He’s already in the rom when they bring Jesse inside, watching how the kid jerks and drags his feet, looking altogether less pale and green then when last Gabe saw him. There’s resistance in him yet, with how he struggles against one of the men bringing him in, twisting in his cuffs angrily. “I can walk!” He hisses, when when he’s forced into the seat, Jesse snaps again, “Easy, goddamnit!”

His wrists are unchained, and then chained back to the table. All the while, Jesse refuses pointedly to look at Gabriel. Like this is his doing. Like he didn’t shove six-hundred or so dollars into the kid’s hand, begging him to get out while he still could. He feels no remorse for it. There’s no remorse left to go around. He knows that he’ll have to face Jack again, soon, and the prospect of facing those blue eyes in all of their vacancy and ruin --it takes everything Gabe can feel, all at once, and turns it to dread.

But just because Jesse won’t ask, that doesn’t make him any the sweeter, and he sounds sneering and impatient when he mutters, “ Took your sweet time comin’ back, didn’t ya?”

Like it was some put-off duty, Gabe notes. God, how little Jesse knows. “Got held up.” Gabe grinds out, unsure of what to say. “Little trouble with a bridge.”

That gets the kid’s attention. His head comes up and he pales a little, drawing his mouth in as if afraid to make a noise. Not that jesse is any potential suspect of theirs, too low in the Deadlock food chain, criminally under-utilised because of some backwards alpha pageantry.

Jesse’s head ducks a little. He nods. “So I hear.” He says, solemnly. “Guess that explains why y’look like somebody walked over your grave.”

Is it there, in his face: the sense of loss? No matter what Gabe does, it seems to linger on him like the smell of damp after rainfall. He’s only thankful it’s cause isn’t more obvious. The words have started to wound him, now. Can’t get his mouth around ‘miscarriage’. Doesn’t have it in him to say anything at all.

He thinks about the splintered bone of the beta’s thumb. He swallows. “What can you tell me about it?”

Jesse’s head cants. He squints a little. “I can tell you what the news reports told me. That’s it.”

Gabe already believes him. It’s more out of habit than anything else that he applies a little pressure. “You so sure about that?”

Jesse’s squint turns on him. The kid looks admonished at the accusation --like he isn’t already here in handcuffs for a plethora of charges (murder being amongst them). “Gabriel--” The kid tries to laugh in some cavalier way. He doesn’t finish the thought.
Gabe won’t let him. “Be very fucking careful about what you say next, kid.” He says, slowly. “If it transpires that you knew anything --anything at all, about what happened, I won’t be the one pulling you outta here.” His head shakes. He feels righteously angry to say it, for some reason, despite the distant look of horror creeping over Jesse’s features. “I got the jurisdiction to make sure you stay here a good long time.” Looking at Jesse again with a sharp anger that has strongarmed some of the weaker-willed Deadlock men into talking, he asks, “You got anything to tell me?”

Jesse’s expression is frozen in thought for a second. His mouth quirks open in a smile that doesn’t dare to be fully formed. “I was barely allowed t’ shoot a gun.” he says, deliberately. “F’I was caught up in somethin’ like this, you’d know about it.”

Gabe lifts a hand to his face, then, and scrubs hard over his eyes. He thinks to nod, distantly. Wishes he could ask jesse for something to put him into a dreamllike, voidless sleep --or at least give him that click. Sleeping in that bed with Jack is almost unthinkable, now, with blood winding in the sheets, and the way his mate lays there, cold, with his eyes open.

Gabe woke to find him looking at the sonogram the other night. Didn't know Jack had even kept it until then. And he hates that picture --hates it so goddamn much, because it’s all they have. And he is so afraid of losing it. So goddamn afraid.

It must be on his face, or something, because he hears the sharp clink of metal on metal, looking up to see Jesse trying to lean over, with concern, somehow, all over his face. It looks sweet on him, too, the sincerity of the emotion. “You still with me, Gabriel?”

Gabe exhales deeply. He nods. “Sure.” He says, if only to say something.

With a clumsy hand, he feels into the pocket of his jacket and places a crumpled carton of cigarettes onto the table, as well as a clear zippo lighter. Watches Jesse’s expression turn to a dismay of sorts -- like he can’t tell that it’s some offering of peace for them both. the strongest thing Gabe can get his hands on, right now.

He’s the first to take one, and light is, feeling immediately better for the sensation of the air when it reaches his lungs. It’s almost an afterthought to reach across to Jesse’s wrists, pausing at the metal of the handcuffs and looking up at the kid warily. “Don’t get smart.” he warns. It’s all he says --the rest being implicit when he unchains Jesse’s hands and watches the kid reach across greedily to take and light a cigarette of his own.

From there, they extend into silence. Gabe is nowhere near peaceful, yet. He thinks about the evidence locker. Wonders if anybody would even notice a few moved decimal points. Wonders if he’d be able to work through the night with adderall and weed. He wouldn’t sleep like that -- wouldn’t have to face Jack. He knows he has to. He isn’t strong enough to.

The silence, for once, doesn’t seem to bother Jesse none. At least not for a little while, when he’s done tipping ash onto the interrogation room floor, and reaching over for another cigarette. “Y’wouldn’t believe the things I’ve had to do in here for a smoke.” He says, absently.

Gabe doesn’t have any sympathy to spare. He looks at the table mindlessly, “So quit.”

The kid lets out some soft noise of amusement a that. Leans back in his chair and defers a little, to the statement. “I probably ought to.” he murmurs. it seems out-of-character. Jesse is usually the sort to defend his vices. To defend all of his choices. Maybe he just realises now isn’t the time for that, and
instead, moves to a more pressing question. “how much longer do I hafta stay here?” It comes out on a plume of smoke, giving it a much more relaxed impression than Jesse really has.

Gabe continues to smoke without thought. He needs this. Needs a drink --or something. “Not ’til I get this business sorted.” He says, dully. “Got a few leads to chase down.”

that only serves to make Jesse antsier, and he shifts in his seat a little. “An’ what if they don’t lead to anythin’?”

Gabe sighs. “They will.”

“How’re you so sure?”

He sighs again. Lowers his cigarette. “Because I asked for the truth.” Jesse’s mouth opens like he’s got some smart remark for that, until Gabe cuts him off. “With a hammer. For fourteen hours.”

Then the kid’s smirk is gone and he’s looking a little pale again, reeling back in his chair with a look of discomfort on his face. “Jesus,” He murmurs, looking suddenly nervous. “You ain’t gonna--”

“You’re more use to me intact.” Gabe interrupts him, passionlessly, somehow sounding sentimental without meaning to. It embarasses him. He tries to cover it up by saying something else. “A few more weeks. Let the dust settle, first.”


It’s of no comfort to either of them when Jesse chews on his bottom lip absently like he has some real answer to that. Like there’s some reason he’s unhappy to wait. The silence that pairs with it is equally disconcerting. He doesn’t know how much worry he should now devote to Jesse until he hears the kid, in some reedy murmur, whisper, “Gabriel..?”

Gabe lifts his head. “What?”

Jesse is twisting in his chair in a way that Gabe has never seen before. Anxiety doesn’t look good on the kid. Doesn’t fit his face at all as he mulls over his words at a glacial, painstaking pace. “Y’know when y’said --when you asked if I had anythin’ to tell you?”

The words are the last Gabe wants to hear. It feels like an anvil has dropped in his stomach. He swallows. “Tell me,” He starts out, his words catching a little. “Tell me you had nothing to do with that bridge.”

Jesse looks up, lost. He pauses. “No,” He murmurs. “I had nothin’ to do with that. Honest.” He says, weakly. “It’s, uh, it’s about somethin’ else.”

The words reach gabriel. He hears it, and with some infinite and instant relief, takes another long drag of his cigarette. Jesse watches the action, pained by it, waiting for permission to speak quite ardentely. Like there’s anything he could say that would be of importance right now. There’s almost relief on the kid’s face when Gabe does finish his drag, and crush the cigarette into the table.
But that relief dies when Gabe says, “It can wait.”

Jesse almost stands in protest. Without thinking, his mouth opens. “Gabrie--”

But he won’t have any of it. “That’s enough.” Gabe barks, suddenly --loudly enough that the command reaches, and Jesse submits, despite his resistance, and bewilderment. So much the better. The last thing Gabe can contend with right now is more. “It’s not about the bridge. It’s not urgent. It can wait.”

With that, Jesse head tilts, dejectedly. He looks like he might be sick. Doesn’t offer a word against it. That much is for the best.

He doesn’t even resist when Gabe re-cuffs his hands, trying to be gentle, still, despite it all. tucking the last remaining cigarettes into the top pocket of Jesse’s uniform.

Gabe tries to be as kind as possible as he does it. Promises, “I’ll be back for you.”

It’s as he says that, standing right besides Jesse, that the kid leans hard and presses his face to Gabe’s body, almost affectionately. The movement is so unprecedented and strange that Gabe hardly knows what to do, for a second, standing there as the kid breathes him in. It seems almost therapeutic to Jesse. gabe doesn’t look too deep into it. Maybe he’s on the cusp of heat, needing the scent of an alpha to steady him. It would explain why his scent is still off.

(And it’s a nicer thought than real affection, or love.)

Despite himself, and despite it all, Gabe finds himself lifting a hand and stroking the kid’s hair, absently. Even just the gestures urges something in him. He wishes he could take those cuffs off. Wishes he could do more for Jesse --but the kid isn’t the only one with bound hands.

“Alright.” He hears himself say, with some finality, waiting for Jesse to extricate himself, but making no move to tear the kid away. He allows himself a second more to indulge in it --and nothing else. Then that second is up and he’s forcing Jesse away with a stiff hand. His voice turns hard again. “Alright, kid.” He says, sounding harsh to his own ears. “That’s enough.”

Jesse slumps back into his seat, as he’s told. Lets Gabe go without another word or gesture. That’s probably good. The kid’s done enough, already. Gabe leaves through the door he came in through, and once he's through it, drops hard against the wall. He lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding.

What he doesn’t see is that, on the other side of the glass, Jesse does the same thing.
Chapter Summary

it's happening. what's happening? who knows!
hey look, real footage of me writing this!
i got mad love to all of you. pls validate me

Jack is absent for a few days.

Nobody says anything about it. Nobody dares.

Those who have heard a rumour or two, and even those who know, let it pass. They treat it as any other casualty of war. With a quiet solemnity and distant. The respect of mercy. Nobody goes looking for Jack when he fails to appears when summoned, and Gabe appreciates that. He knows it’s for the best.

Knows he can hardly face Jack as they both are, to be truthful. It’s easier to be destroyed without having the man who is your foundation crumble beneath you. What would be the use in going to him, then? Asking him to lean on another falling man? Better yet to let Jack heal in his own way. If that, indeed, is what he’s doing.

Gabe doesn’t catch him, incidentally, in the shower or in their bed or passing in the hall. Logs of booked rooms leave behind a vague impression of where his mate has disappeared to: simulation rooms rented up under his name that are empty when Gabe is free to investigate, leaving only the wistful suspicion of wintergreen hanging in the air of an empty room.

Days pass like this. It all feels deeply wrong in nature. Ana steers the half-sinking ship in the absence of Jack. More outrities about the hypertrain incident come when the injured are accounted for and the dead buried. The burden never explicitly falls to Gabe, but he knows he needs to shuffle his Company men and pull something fast. Needs to weed out New Mexico good and proper, this time. Give the public something to believe in.

Give Jack a path of least resistance by which to find his way home.

He finds his mate, after six days at a loss, out in the yard of the backlot. It’s turning to the dark night, then. Maybe eleven or so, and there Jack is, sitting upright in the well-kept grass. Gabe finds him purely incidentally, passing through one of the glass corridors to see munitions about a prototype recall when he sees the shape of Jack through a pane, illuminated through light meant for something else.

Gabe sees his back first, faced away, just his shape. He doesn’t realise, when he approaches, that Jack’s eyes are closed. That his mate is millions of miles away, despite where he sits.

The night is about to get colder. That much can be felt in the breeze that picks up and sways some of the taller grasses empathically, and catching the longer strands of Jack’s hair, too. Gabe comes
towards him quietly, and carefully. Unsure if he’ll be able to handle what he finds. God knows he’s already run to New Mexico once before.

But Jack, usually perceptive --and so aware. He doesn’t notice the presence at his back. He remains perfectly still, as if deep in meditation.

Gabe feels like a heretic to even raise his voice to a murmur.

“Jack?”

There is no answer. No way to tell if the words reach his mate at all. So he reaches a hand out, trying to be as gentle as he can with what he knows right now is such a beautiful and fragile thing. The twist in his gut aches. He’ll die to touch Jack, and die to leave him be.

His fingers settle on Jack’s shoulder lightly. He repeats himself. “Jack?”

There is no noise of Jack’s eyes opening. It takes a few seconds, as if almost in reluctance, holding Gabriel in the limbo of uncertainty of whether or not to repeat himself, and then Jack’s head is turned slightly, and he’s looking forward. At the angle he’s facing, the blue of the irises have light passing through them, and they stand almost as if separate unto themselves: like the earth from far, far away.

Jack lets out some deep, resigned breath. It’s indistinguishable from the breeze. But he does not move.

Gabe’s hand doesn’t move from his shoulder. Afraid to let go. Unsure if there’s anything left to hold on to. He sounds reedy and almost afraid when he says, “C’mon.” There’s no conviction to it. “It’s getting late.”

Like time matters any more to Jack. Like it has any meaning. God, the man doesn’t even have a north anymore. Like the moment he got that news, he lost the directions for how to go up. Is that why he stays where he is, in the grass, looking more tired than he ever has in his entire life?

Looking like that and daring to say, “I’m not tired.”

There was a time when Gabe could decipher these sorts of things. But it’s not the years --it’s the distance. Jack is the sail of a boat on his horizon, closer than before, but still not in well-seeming clarity enough to be understood, or even fully seen. Gabe is at an utter loss, and all he can say is, “Please.”

One of Jack’s hands drop from his lap, loosely, to grasp at the grass he’s sitting it. He pulls up a handful and surrenders the blades to the wind. There’s nothing else to pick at. No flowers are in this patch of earth. There might have been before. Gabe doesn’t know.

But he’s growing impatient with himself. Mistakes it for impatience with Jack enough to call his name again. “Jack--”

“When did you finish them?” Jack interjects. A non-sequitur. His tone marks it with some grave importance. He turns his head to look at Gabe then. “The pills, in the cabinet? When did you take the last one?”

There is nothing Gabe hates more in that moment than himself to hear that. To bear witness to it and have no defense. He shrugs a shoulder. He knows. “Last week.” Is all he can say.
Jack’s head is still turned, but his gaze has migrated away from his mate. Looks out at something else, unseen, instead. “Before or after?”

That takes a minute. Jack hasn’t been able to put words to it yet. Gabe is getting better. But, then, he is the stranger watching it unfold through a window, and Jack is the one on the other side of the glass. He was always going to need longer.

“Before.” Gabe says. He doesn’t know if that’s the right answer. It’s at least honest.

Jack’s jaw tightens, momentarily. It gives some indication that maybe he’s disappointed. That the answer displeases him, but hell, at least there is an answer. At least they’re talking about it. That defense is meaningless, though, in the face of jack swallowing, and sighing again. “I thought you quit.”

There’s hurt, there. Gabe doesn’t know if he can face it. “That’s--”

“Thought maybe you’d left a few.” Jack drops his head, then. The way his face looks --translucent, tracing-paper skin and eyes like raindrops on a windshield: it is a defeat. Suddenly Gabe doesn’t know how they got here. Doesn’t know the path back to before, and then suddenly he’s in this moment where Jack is weak enough to stoop, and say, “You didn’t even leave me one, and I-I--...”

Gabe’s hand presses firmer. “Jack--”

“I just want to sleep.” The strength of the phrase --it’s latent bitterness: it catches Gabe off-guard entirely. He hasn’t a clue what to say, and stands there, silently, uselessly, until Jack coughs angrily into his fist and asks, angrily, “That’s what they’re for, isn’t it?”

Truth is no ally here, it seems. Gabe remembers the first time he’s let a benzo settle in his mouth -- weak and twitchy from withdrawal, awake at the forty-seventh hour. The first in a short course, prescribed, just to right him through the worst of where the codeine wasn’t. Has her ever slept more beautifully? More deeply, or restfully, since? The first was all it took, and he was instantly seduced.

So Jack lost him, and it’s from some strange, childish sort of fear Gabe has, of losing Jack, and losing him now, that he tries to do something. Kneels down at Jack’s side, greeted by the somehow sombre scent of winter. He doesn’t touch Jack further, as if to avoid the fallout from his words. “They’re gone.” He says, emptily.

Jack makes some noise of derision. “Like you couldn’t get more.” He says, tightly.

“Deadlock’s dried up.” Gabe parries. It’s the best he can do in the moment. It isn’t nearly good enough, and he knows it by the way Jack’s mouth opens in silence for a second like he’s staggered by it.

“The hell they are.” He says, miserably. “Must have been somebody else who got to the trai--”

“Then we don’t know where the rest are operating out of yet.” Gabe cuts him off as quickly as he can, with at least the truth. Some of his better men are undercover tracing Jesse’s lead about the bunny ranch. But his words still stumble over each other a bit. It doesn’t feel right to be shouting back at each other like before, undoing every bit of ground gained back and every moment of renewal between them these last weeks. Jack’s mark is still fresh, but the intention behind it -did that die too? Along with--...
When he looks up again he realises Jack’s shoulders are sort of trembling like maybe he wants to cry. He doesn’t, of course --his pride wouldn’t allow it, or let him lie, or ask for help. No, instead, he bites down hard on his own lip and looks away. “Be creative, Gabe.” He says, venomously. “You usually are.”

What is he angry for, and why at Gabe? For once, at least in this: aren’t they both innocents? Both on the same side, and at a loss? Defensive, but barely, Gabe draws back. “I thought I quit--” He tries to say, weakly.

Then Jack is at his throat again. “I thought you did too!” he yells, then, like sudden thunder in an otherwise only overcast sky. It seems to startle them both, and then Jack dips his head like he feels sick or ashamed or something indistinguishable. Gabe leave him to that, for the moment. Settles himself in trying to understand the situation.

He never wanted to see Jack like this. Nevertheless --nevertheless, he’s here. It’s how things are, and he should be present for them. One of them has to be.

After a few moments of lingering, miserable silence, he hears Jack sniff, and then ask, “Do you at least have a cigarette?"

And he doesn’t --smoked most of the with Jesse and the rest of the pack he’d had on the transport back. There might be one secreted in the back of his locker, but it’s doing no good for either of them there. So he remains empty-handed, confused at the question.

He hasn’t seen Jack smoke a cigarette since the program, and even then, it was a nasty habit he’d acquired only from being so plied with them. It had been a miserable time, and cigarettes were a poor form of compensation. Christ, it had been all they’d to do. Then by the time they were moving out in a unit as overwatch, supplies were so scarce that they’d both motioned to quit. It worked, for a time, and instead of smoking with a bloody, shaking hand after a day of ambling through collapsed cities and apartment buildings filled with corpses, Gabe switched out neatly to codeine.

Cigarettes only came back into the picture after that, and even then, he’s never had the heart to smoke before Jack. Now, it seems trivial, and yet; something keeps him.

“I don’t,” Gabe says, emptily, empty-handed, watching Jack’s face carefully. He doesn’t understand why this didn’t come sooner. Why Jack didn’t lay there in the infirmary bed begging to be sedated, instead of now. He has to ask. Nudges his mate as gently as he can. Talks in a whisper. “What happened?”

Jack’s chin rises in a way that used to be defiant. He laughs, bitterly. Shakes his head because a blurry image is the only one of the world he can face. “What kind of question is that?” he swallows - -it betrays his false mirth. “You know what happened, Gabe. I--...”

Even if Jack could say it --or say anything to the effect of it, he doesn’t. Dips his head miserably instead and lets his silence extend to serve as an answer. It’s an ugly word, and all of the other ways to say it are no less an offense. Mendacious in one way or another, and Jack can’t stand mendacity almost as much as he can’t stand the thought of speaking plainly.

It’s quiet for a time, then. The breeze picks up. The patch is clear of flowers, and christ, even if they were weeds, at least they were colourful. Gabe doesn’t press either way. He permits the weight of Jack when he leans his head against his mate’s shoulder, pathetically.
“Angela,” He whispers, after a second. Gabe feels a cold spring tense in his guts, but it’s one he can’t vocalise. Hasn’t he been here before? Hasn’t he seen this a million times over, and yet remains helpless to do anything? All he can do is listen as Jack says, “She said, because I’m O-negative, and the --the, uh--...” Swallowing, Jack’s voice turns to dust. “The effects of the program--...” He can barely speak.

But he does, one way or another, after coughing angrily once more. “There was an Rh incompatibility. That my antibodies--...” jack’s face turns dark, then, but only for a second before it withers. And then he really is crying, a single line being cut into his face as he whimpers, “She said it was a miracle I carried for that long.”

Gbæ hardly knows what to say. His understanding is rudimentary at best, and he clings to what he’s been telling himself to stay together. “It was.” He says, and when Jack’s teeth almost bare at the words, he realises how awful the words are. Tries to supply something else instead. “And we know, now, for next time. We’ll --we’ll be prep--”

“Next time?” Jack is inconsolable. His eyes are dead with bitterness, fresh tears cutting through them, and Jack doesn’t cry easily. Was always good at keeping it together for the rest of them, no matter the circumstance: fishing the bodies of children from rubble, watching his friends die in their beds, all tangled in the regulation grey SEP sheets. That this is the thing to break him, after all that sacrifice; there is a cosmic immorality to it.

Worse when the anger dies out in him, and Jack is just shaking his head, not a thing left in him. “There is no next time, Gabe!” He hisses. “I-I can’t--...I’d have to--” Desperate hands scrub at his face like Jack is ashamed of his own tears. “I’d have to be dangerously immunosuppressed, and even then --even then , there’s no guarantee I’d even--...”

Gabe realises too late what has been eating at Jack’s insides. What has really been wrong, all of this time. His pity failed Jack --his disinterest, as he ran away to New Mexico again, leaving his mate alone, to believe all this time. To let it get to him, and only him.

Prepared for a backlash, he lifts his arm and draws Jack close to him. Murmurs, almost fearfully, “Jack, you can’t blame your--”

But it isn’t enough. It never is, and then Jack is screaming, “I have to blame something !”

God, he wanted it badly, didn’t he? It has been years, and he has really believed: they both had.

But for Jack to be sure, now, in the knowledge that it will never happen: there are no words Gabe could give. Nothing he can do. Better, maybe, that none of this ever happened. To have lost is far worse than to have never had: not if Jack can’t carry to term, or adopt.

Not for the first time, Gabe remains silent, grim in the stead of it. Wanting to hold Jack but finding no nerve by which to do so.

And, not for the first time, Jack feels tears work themselves down his face, wishing to God Gabe would just say something.

But he doesn’t, does he? Gabe remains as he is, sitting, wordless, willing to change the state of play but finding his silence merely locking them within an endgame where the pieces are simply resetting themselves, again and again. And he doesn’t want it to be like before. He doesn’t want to be here,
watching Jack rise, to leave. He doesn’t want to lose his mate, again.

So he gets to his feet, too, and takes Jack’s arm when he tries to move away.

He meets resistance, and Jack tries to shake him off and step away, hissing, “Get off of me.”

But he doesn’t.

No, then his grip tightens like he’s trying to turn Jack back towards him, even though he knows Jack’s pride won’t allow him to be seen like this any longer, and even though Gabe can feel his mate fighting him at every instance, gripping and locking Gabe’s wrist so he has to let go, even only if momentarily. A second and he’s grasping again, rested enough to be more alert, having the advantage if only for this time.

Jack’s physical protests only escalate in enmity. He throws through his shoulder to get the alpha off of him, bucking wildly like a fish out of water when it fails to work and then Gabe is at his back, larger, if only just, tightening his arms around the omega oppressively. “Get --off!--!”

Bending suddenly, dropping his weight, Jack manages a shoulder toss, messy as it is, giving him a the brief victory of freedom. He breathes hard --even harder when Gabe, winded and on his back, swipes out a hand to tug at Jack’s ankle, and then they’re both down.

Distantly, he hears Jack cry out, falling onto the grass without the barrier of his hands. He falls directly onto his side and coughs out in slight and sudden pain, scrambling to get back up and away.

But Gabe crawls faster to cover his mate again, hissing out breathlessly. “Don’t fight me--”

Jack tries to kick out, again, but to no real avail, only managing to turn them. He’s at a loss, given the position. Gabe has seen him get out of this position a million times before; but those moments were clearer of thought, when his face wasn’t burning with tears and his insides shredded with pain that’s festering from being held inside.

Useless with distraction, Jack can only make himself harder contain, it seems, and it’s all Gabe can to contain him, whispering through his teeth, “Don’t--”

“Get off!” Jack cries out again. He sounds utterly winded and breathless, and even if he despises Gabe in this moment; at least they’re close. God, even if he hates him right now, at least they’re thinking of eachother. “I don’t wan’t--”

“That’s --too bad.” Gabe retorts, shortly, trying to turn them back so that he’s above Jack, but is mate is relentlessly shifting and refuses to be cowed so easily. It’s quickly tiring. Enough to make him shout, “That’s enough!”

His arms tighten around Jack and he digs the toes of his shoes into the dit until he’s anchored fully, and Jack’s bucks and protests become weaker and weaker. Then, nothingness, and Jack is just beneath him, taking in these knifelike breaths.

He’s not the only one. Realising how breathless he is, then, but loathe to give his mate an escape route, Gabe wheezes into the space of Jack’s neck when he finds it in him to speak. “Jesus fucking Christ, Jack.” He says, angrily, “You should have told me. We should be figuring this out together- -”
He feels Jack rear back, nastily, not trying to break free but trying merely to buy room by which to spit back, “There’s nothing to figure ou--”

“Fine, then!” Gabe cuts him off. “Fine.” He shakes his head, taking a few ragged breaths in. “Even if that’s true--...” He stops short at the words. Knows he’ll have to come back to them at some point, when he’s alone enough to be vulnerable.

Because, Christ, he wanted this too, didn’t he? And if there are never any children, there will never be any reason to leave; will there? The direction of their lives will be vigorously fixed. And if it’s to be here, at Overwatch, the last thing he should do right now is let the distance stretch between the two of them again.

Maybe Gabe is just as afraid of being alone as he is of being with Jack.

(Or maybe, just maybe, if you were to dust his heart for fingerprints, you’d find nothing but Jesse’s.)

He doesn’t realise it’s been silent for an age, and that he’s been holding Jack beneath him, until he becomes aware of the violent trembling in his mate’s silent form. Silent for nought longer, though, and then he hears a terrible cry. Realises that Jack has been holding his breath so as not to be heard in his agony.

But now it is too late, and he feels Jack’s hands cover his arms as if to pull him closer. As if they could be, physically. “I-I can’t --” He grinds out, against the current of his tears, a rock in a stream. “I’m s-sorry, Gabe.”

They have been in this room before. Did they ever leave it? Have they made any steps at all, or is Gabe condemned to watch Jack’s face change in the infirmary at Angela’s words for the rest of his life? Knowing, too, that there’s nothing he can do to halt the inevitable: that Jack will forever and always be torn apart at the hands of a child.

Face-down, in the flowerless grass, Jack whimpers again, “Just please -- don’t leave me here.”

And Gabe realises; the distance of the last few days between them, and of all the years before that?

It’s of his own design.

-

Jesse’s eyes water. So he closes them.

What was it he’d said? Hands in his hair --pulling. Pulling hard. His eyes close harder, frowning at the sudden, sharp pain. His jaw aches. His mind is elsewhere, working.

God, it had been something fantastically witty, hadn’t it? Gabriel had put his hand over Jesse’s, right over where that old mark had been, and he’d said--...

Christ, Jesse can’t remember, and can hardly try to when he feels a too-deep intrusion at the back of his throat and feels himself gag, violently, trying to expel the incursion to find air but finding none. The cock in his mouth barely retreats a centimeter and more fresh, hot tears form in the corner of his eyes, threatening to make themselves known even though Jesse is sick enough already of hot salt.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat as a kind of warning: he’s clamped his teeth together
before and tasted blood for less, but here there’s no ready escape. The cell door is open, but then what? The hand in his hair tugs sharply again, as if disinterested in Jesse’s protest, and he thinks, better to get it over with now.

Best get it over with and think of something else. Anything else. Gabriel.

Thinking of Johnny leaves him raw, still. Of how it sits, now, side-by-side in his head with the image of Johnny’s brains all over the way and the contrast of Gabriel’s ministrations. Were lovers supposed to be that way? Gentle and easy? It seems impossible. Jesse thinks he’s known a million men, before, felt and tasted them, and not a one of them had been like that.

Not this one, certainly: now contended to piston his hips forward nastily and fuck into Jesse’s throat like the noises of trapped air are either erotic or silent.

It’s not remotely, and Jesse doesn’t even have the courtesy of an alpha’s scent to get him remotely hard.

Jesse’s knees hurt. Almost misses being on his back in a bed, even if he was a little too dry most of the time to avoid the sting and burn (and blood, for the one or two he let knot him). His jaw wants to snap himself shut with the way it aches, and the way he can do little to stop the precum and saliva from slobbering down his front like a fucking animal.

He opens his eyes again, briefly, out of some bad habit, wincing up at the beta who’s going at it with a sadistic sort of enthusiasm. Like the cinderblock wall and curly floor and cage bars detract none from the hot wet pleasure of Jesse’s mouth and how good and trained he is not to stop, no matter how much he’d like to.

It’s worse when the beta gets closer. Greasy hands tug at the root of Jesse’s hair --one drops to his face and thumbs through the mess on his chin to slather it around his face. He looks down at Jesse hungrily, and then pushes in as deep as he can go, forcing the head of his cock right down into Jesse’s throat, and forcing his nose into the nest of hairs at it’s base that smell purely of sharp, foul sweat.

Jesse gags, audibly, the noise almost entirely stifled, and ultimately futile. The beta’s thrusts become more and more rhythmless and desperate and Jesse knows he’s close and it’s coming. His eyes close. He makes fists by his knees and tries to wind his mind back to Gabriel.

The way his hands had been calloused but his touch gentle. Reverent, almost, and if Jesse remembers that part, and only that part (not the constant rejection, and not the way Gabriel had twisted his arm and forced money into hand and could hardly stand to be in the same room as him), then he can recall it fondly.

Maybe Gabriel was the best thing that ever happened to him. Maybe he was the worst.

At least Johnny stayed, afterwards. Most of the time.

With his eyes closed, Jesse can still see the neon buzz of the room, even if his memory is as hazy as his head, and even if he still doesn’t know how he ended up in those sheets with Gabriel in the first place. All he cares to recall is the warmth of the alpha’s body, and the heat of his scent and the loving certainty of his hand on Jesse’s.

‘Let’s get one thing straight’, he’d said, in that low, husky voice.
The beta makes a noise of absolute pleasure, and drives himself home hard.

‘I hate snoops.’ They were kissing, then.

And now Jesse is rearing back, violently, the hand in his hair barely relenting to give him room to wretch. It’s bad etiquette to spit, Miss Marie always used to tell him so --and despite the mouthful of hot cum that he can barely keep in his mouth, he swallows out of practise, wiping the bits he can’t quite keep in his mouth away, feeling bile, distantly, and wondering what colour his vomit will be if it comes back up later.

For his part, the beta loses interest in Jesse the moment his mouth is empty and leans back against the desk behind him with a throaty sigh. There’s no friendly hand to help Jesse from his knees, busy as they are tucking a cock back into the guy’s pants. He does up the zipper and nods, easily, watching Jesse right himself shakily.

“Hell of a mouth on you.” He says, lazily, taking a cigarette out of his top pocket. Jesse works his now-closed jaw a few times before he speaks, his voice squashed as if trapped down within him.

“Yeah,” He says, dismissively, finding the examination table to lean on to steady himself. Jesse hasn’t felt right in a while, but standing so suddenly makes him feel waifish and faint, and this is the last place he’d like to pass out. Had never cared much for infirmaries, having seen them only in films before. “Would’ja jus’ sign off on me already?”

The beta barks out a short laugh around his cigarette. He moves away from Jesse, backwards and around to the terminal, pausing. “An’ they say romance is dead.” he jokes, beginning to type before slowly aborting his movements.

Jesse can’t stand to wait. If he does --if this doesn’t get done, then he’ll be put through the physical exam for sure. If they check his blood, they’ll know. They’ll know, and they’ll act. Better to get on his knees for this than to curse his pride later.

But the beta isn’t moving, so there might not be a choice, either way.

Jesse swallows, again, and raws a little closer to the terminal, impatiently. “What’s the hold-up?”

The beta turns to him. Pauses almost thoughtfully, and Jesse would think it pensive if he didn’t note the twitch of the other man’s nose. He realises he’s being scented, and takes a nervous step backwards. He knows how this tends to go. At least, he thinks he does. Then the beta surprises him. “I’m just thinking about all the trouble I’m sparing you.”

Jesse squints. “What?”

Smiling with small, ferrety teeth, the beta sighs as if kindly put out. “It’s just,” He begins, and Jesse already knows it’s going to be anything but just. “If you don’t take the physical, then other people start wanting to find ways to opt out, and then word gets around.” His head shakes. “I know your kind are worse than a sewing circle when they get together. If somebody important were to hear about this--”

Jesse realises, then, the implication of the tone. Feels something in him sink like an anvil: like his stomach is an ocean full of bowling balls. “I wouldn’t te--”
The beta laughs again, fondly. “Oh, kid.” He says, shaking his head once more. “That’s not enough. I need more, uh --more incentive .” Then his eyes down Jesse’s body, obscured as it is by the size-too-big orange overalls but leaving the same hungry impression nonetheless. “I hear boys like you open real sweetly.”

The cum still on the back of Jesse’s tongue burns, and for one shameful he thinks he’ll be sick, like some coltish sixteen-year-old. He doesn’t have the excuse of novelty. He can’t pretend to be naive, and so tries to sound as serious as possible when he squeaks out. “I -I can’t--”

The beta throws up his hands in resignation. “Well, if you’re not willing to help me out--”

“I’m willin’!” Jesse cuts in, sharply. “I am.” He sniffs and swallows, feeling disgusting. He sort of wishes he were dead, but Gabe’s promise is the only thing keeping him holding on in here. A little more time. It’s only for a bit longer. Then he won’t have to face this place. Things will be different on the outside. It won’t matter if they know, then. It’s from that he says, “I can come back tomorrow, an’ we can do the same. But --but I can’t do nothin’ else.”

The beta merely stares at him, then. The silence extends and every second of it is agony. Jesse is already on hands and knees, trying to make it to the finish line --to get far away from this place if he can. Hasn’t there been enough? Does there have to be this last indignity? Jesse has spent all of his life on his knees or on his back, it feels. Isn’t it enough?

That much is up to the beta, who chews on a finger absently before shrugging. “You do got a hell of a mouth, kid.” he says, before dropping both of his hands. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll sign you off tomorrow. You come by again. We call it even.”

Relief floods Jesse’s system like water flooding en engine, in that he can hardly start, unsure of it to make for the door or the beta, sufficing it to nod quickly and say, “Fine.” his mouth still tastes like hell. “That’s fine.”

The beta stands, then, and leads him to the door. It’s all very strange. Jesse is sort of trembling. He feels colder than usual. He tries not to recoil at the touch of the man’s hand on his back as he’s brought to the door. It’s opened for him, and out in the hall, the rest of the prison continues their business, sweetly oblivious.

“That’s fine.”

He pulls away roughly, but keeps his head down to demonstrate some show of submission. There’s no real sense in fighting it, and he knows it as he feels eyes on him as he walks away. Walking back to his --his cell, for god’s sake, where he’s locked away for everything he was ever coerced into doing. Even now, he can’t escape it, and Jesse thinks, as he’s always thought, maybe this kind of business just follows him.

He’s only alone there, past the dull stare of staff and the hungry or thoughtless gaze of other inmates. Some play cards and checkers in the designated recreation rooms. Others smoke, or fight. Jesse
recognises a few of the ones in the corners with cigarettes. Had to get his somehow, didn’t he?

Jesse’s only sick once when he gets to his room, unable to settle his stomach that’s turning over like a car engine, failing to start. That’s before he crawls into the hard mattress pad and pulls the sheets over his body, making some attempt at comfort.

A bit longer, he promises himself. Throws an arm over his eyes to block out the drab of the ceiling -- only to find himself staring into the black into of the mark on his arm. It’s an unwelcome reminder, so Jesse throws his arm elsewhere, carelessly over his stomach as his eyes close.

It’s not forever. It’s not forever.

It can’t be.

-

One of the men from Company B, Mickhailov, strikes gold.

Less than two days later the sparse trailer park, southside of the I-40, that Jesse had spoken of is swarming with agents.

Mickhailov posed as an defector, ex-paramilitary, looking to get his hands clean of a cache of weapons-grade nuclear material. He’d provided a sample, and convincing enough references. According to anybody willing to look, he went far back. Far enough for the remnants of Deadlock to scurry out from their ratholes and out from under the rug.

It’s as fitting a base of improvised operations as any. Sweet omega girls --mostly runaways, by the looks of things, are the first to be brought into custody. Most are barely of age, terrified and full of attitude, fighting their arrests and yelling about their rights. Their souteneur is a pale-faced, older woman who has no fight in her when they come for her, sitting in the only solid building in the desertland and smoking away.

Gabe recognises her once she’s bought out: Miss Marie. Jesse’s old go-between.

Two trailers on the edge of the site, marked with a line of red above the door, and they prove the most lucrative: stacked high with crates of contraband, holoslides contained backlogs and inventory lists.

But most importantly of all: deadlock men.

Alphas, as backwater criminals are won’t to be, five of them in the trailers, two runners shot dead making for the perimeter and four more in the laps of the girls. Witnesses of the hypertrain identified between six to nine men salvaging the wreckage. These are those men.

Resistance is minimal. The girls are loaded up into one transport --likely to be put through juvy or shovelled back into the system as wards of the state of some such. The alphas are processed separately.

There are nine in handcuffs, and the ranch is cleared, more or less, when two men crawl out from beneath a trailer and make for the tree-line in the distance. The runners.

A few company men pursuit, but they’ve no marksman among them, and then a shoot-out is ensuing.
The runners have minimal firepower, and Gabe makes ground with the company men quickly.

One of them takes a few shots to his stomach before deciding to go down, clutching at bramble, and crying out horribly. The other dies instantly, his brow marred by a bullet, soundless in the demise, slumping against a tree. He’s graceless to reach the ground. Gabe leads the procession to get the alpha on the ground still twisting and crying out.

He has a service pistol drawn as he comes upon the guy, sneering out angrily. “Hands up.”

The alpha is still blubbering in his agony. His hands are beneath him. Working at something.

Gabe fire a warning shot into the dirt. “I said hands--”

There’s a muffled click, and the alpha’s hands come up from under him, shining with blood. Gabe watches them raise, carefully, and it’s not until a few second have passed that he sees a dark ring, obscuring the vivid red all over the alpha’s raised hands, and how it catches in the light.

Something is dangling off of it.

Gabe’s mouth goes to open again, before he makes the connection. The click --the ring. A pin. It’s a grenade pin.

“Get Back!” It comes out of him instinctively. His heel is already turned. He’s already making to run. One of his arms waves to alert the others. “Get bac--”

It makes no difference when the thing goes off.

Not for everyone.

-

They come for him in the middle of the morning.

Jesse knows he’s been caught out.

One of the security staff lead him by a pair of handcuffs. His stomach rests uneasy like a curse turning in it’s grave. He prepares himself for the worst as he walks, but his feet are dragging and he’s looking twitchily at every face and murmured word he hears. The staff leading him are talking about something, and he can’t tell if he’s hallucinating his own name or not.

Can they smell him? Is that it? Or is it something --or somebody else?

He thinks he might be sick again. No, he’s --he’s sure of it, right up until the moment he realises where he’s being lead: the interrogation room.

Something settles his insides immediately. Gabriel, he thinks, deliriously. Has the hour come yet? If he on the cusp of shaking the cuffs and never having to face this place again? Christ, Jesse doesn’t even know how he pictures freedom beneath Gabriel. Doesn’t think he’s ever really had it himself, so all he can imagine is an infinite stretch of open highway: baked orange asphalt leading him anywhere he’d like.

To Mexico. To home, if there is one.
He stops short of the door as it’s unlocked by one of the staff, relief building in him and waiting to be unleashed. He steps inside nervously, dragged as they move to chain him to the table.

There’s a sharp scent of artificial lemon and citronella in the room that’s distinctly un-alpha and un-Gabriel, and Jesse is aware of it even before he hears a hard, even command.

“Stop.” One of the staff turn, and find a woman, dressed in some sort of fatigues. She’s holding her hands together at the front of her body in a tight but somehow patient gesture. “That’s enough.”

She steps forward as if to make herself more clear. “That will be all.”

It all happens so quickly. Jesse hardly has time to process the action of the cuffs being taken off, and then the door opens and shuts with the departure of the staff and it’s all he can do to watch them, bewildered and terrified, left alone with a stranger and with no explanation. His eyes track from the door to the desk. He stands at the back of the room. He doesn’t look at the woman.

That’s fine. She does the talking, anyway.

“How nice it is to finally meet you.” Is what she says, but she remains on her side of the table nonetheless. “I was the one who initially suggestion your for the position. I am so glad I have Reyes’ approval.”

Her eyes remain on him. Jesse is still lingering by the door. He manages to meet her gaze but feels pinned under it, like a butterfly crushed on the wheel. The confusion in his face isn’t clear, obscured by an unreadable defense. It’s only when Jesse’s mouth opens and closes and he murmurs, “Reyes?” that she seems to sense the room.

“Gabriel, yes.” She confirms, and then makes a face of neutral displeasure. “I’m sure you were expecting him, and not me, but I’m afraid he’s indisposed as of right now.” That has Jesse’s concern, and he looks up at long last to finally survey who he’s looking at.

Omega, if his nose is much to go by. She’s north of forty, he’d guess. North of forty, signposted by some of the line sin her face and the slight silver to her hair. There’s an air of imperiousness that feels earned rather than learnt, too. Despite her small frame and designation, the way she’s looking at him grants no room for ease, and he can’t tell if that’s the intent or merely the strange mark beneath her eye.

“Ana Amari.” She says, easily, and only then does she extend her hand. “I’m here for your removal.”

Anticipation rises in Jesse’s throat. Suspicion drops in his stomach: a marble at the bottom of a fishtank. Caught between the two, helplessly, he doesn’t move to shake her hand, and can only just get out a single word. “What?” He says, intelligently.

The woman --Miss Ana, is nonetheless patient, and smiles genially, for her trouble. “You’ll be coming with me, Jesse,” She says, gently, “I may call you Jesse, mayn’t I?”

He nods. He wants to ask where they’re going, but Jesus, does it matter. She’s with Gabriel, and at a guess, wherever they’re headed is away from here. The sickness in his stomach settles. He waits for her word.
And she gives it. Rising, she nods to him, the picture of solemnity, and steps towards him.

“Welcome to Overwatch.” Is what she says.

And that really is the least of it.
things are happening, honest! this isn't at all how i pictured this chapter, but it'll have to do.
what do we think the mountain represents? any takers?
also, look at the crazy beautiful art!
sigalawin's beautiful take on the aesthetic of the early chapters
and yuutayo's beautiful piece for chapter five!

“What was it you said?”

On the cusp of consciousness, Gabe opens his eyes slowly. He feels weightless and warm. Gravity is the mere and distant afterthought, and when his eyes find Jack he sees that it’s tying his mate down to his chair. Is he several feet above, floating? His mouth tastes of the dustbowl. He works it open and closed a few times.

Jack continues to look at him. There’s latent fondness there, hiding beneath a look of blank worry. Something like it, at least.

“Six months ago, on the transport from Zurich.” It’s said like an anecdote, even though it’s a little tight in tone as if dismissive. “You said I didn’t have to worry about a couple of hick junkies.” The words are punctuated with no laughter --which they likely warrant. Usually pleases Jack like nothing else to say ‘ I told you so ’, and the joy makes it almost bearable, when it’s there. Gabe is only aware that their hands are touching when Jack moves his thumb.

Gabe is receptive to it, turning his palm over so Jack can trace patterns there --doesn’t have to look down on it to know Gabe’s future. He mistakes it for a gesture of affection. The moment he acts, Jack pulls away. So he swallows. Tries to shrug. “I’ve been wrong before.”

That makes them both laugh, and it’s only in that action that Gabe realises it’s the first time he’s seen Jack smile in a long time, albeit fleeting. He curses whatever painkiller he’s on, then, and the blurring, wavelike effect of the biotics that mean he can’t anchor himself enough to see the expression better. Can’t commit it to memory.

“You must be on something good.” Jack murmurs, against the blade of his hand.

Gabe’s head tilts a best it can in the bed. “What?”

Jack’s smile is almost entirely gone when he opens his mouth again. “Never seen you concede defeat so easily.” His tone is so difficult to read. Is it fondness, or something else? Closer to concern or further from it? Gabe is in no mind to tell, being barely able to remember the extent of his injuries.

He leans his head back and tries to recall: the blast the some-dead men, the ringing in his ears that’s still distant. Hot blood. The overhead lights of transport dazzling his eyes. The steadfast comfort of a biotic canister. He thinks he remembers the word shrapnel, but who can say? Everything’s
survivable. Jack is proof of that much.

Gabe can see that in the way Jack’s leaning on his hand and looking over Gabe like he’s tracing the slope of the Andes or something equally fascinating and distant.

“I thought this was supposed to be easy.” He says, with enough deixis that it wounds them both. “Well,” And then there’s that tiny, mirthless laugh like none of it matters anyway, “Easier.”

Gabe can’t be sure exactly what he means, or if he’s speaking of more than one thing at once. It’s getting harder and harder to read Jack. Or maybe Gabe just looks away at the crucial moments, when it is hardest of all to look. Is that cowardice or self-preservation? Does the intent matter at all, when the action is the same?

The thought is paralysing him, making him unable to find Jack’s face, when his mate moves forward anyway, of his own accord to the edge of the mattress. The movements are slow and purposeful, and without having to say anything, Gabe knows to move backwards as best he can to make room. Then Jack is maneuvering himself on top of the sheets.

Then they are lying next to each other. Jack is facing him, intimately close, his scent suddenly present and gorgeous. Winter has always been his favourite season, and the bright, sharp frost of it is enough to bring him into further lucidity. Before he can think to help it, his instinct has him winding his arms around jack, nosing at his mate’s neck like he’s the one who needs protecting. Like he’s the one who met the business end of a fragmentation grenade.

Instinct is a funny thing, but for once --a gracious once, at that, Jack doesn’t fight it. In fact, he eases into it as if it’s what he’d needed. Like it would have spared him some of the pain of this might have been alleviated if only Gabe’d had the guts to just hold him.

Not that it matters now. Jack scents him gently and sighs into it. “I’m giving the statement in Zurich tomorrow.” He says, his voice shy like he’s saying something he fears in the being heard.

Gabe can hardly muster anger as he is: calmed and utterly seduced by Jack’s presence. It’s a necessary evil, he knows. The world needs to know that Overwatch have responded to the hypertrain incident, and that Deadlock are being dealt with in some way. It’ll quell the baying for Jack’s blood; if only momentarily.

It’ll also mean he’s left to his own devices. Gabe has loose ends to tie up here. Needs to recover before the transport to Switzerland.

It’s all he’s thinking about with any real depth when Jack swallows. “You scared me, y’know.” He murmurs, then, looking away, his pride making no room for such open sentimentality. “I --I thought you might’ve--”

Gabe smiles, softly. The tips of their noses brush. “You don’t have to worry about a couple of hick junkies.” he uses old words, and maybe it’s just mere exposure to them that makes it all the easier for Jack to hear. “Remember?”

Jack plays it off. Doesn’t dignify it with a response or even a laugh. Too busy as he is, then, leaning in, tracing with the barest hint of his lip where the mark Gabe bears lies, still bright from where he’d placed his teeth in optimism, all those weeks prior. There’s a sensitivity to it’s touch for Jack, and Jack’s for his. They match.
Clearly just as affected by the proximity to his alpha, Jack’s voice is dreamlike, and lost in the space of Gabe’s neck when he does speak. “I’m serious,” He says, like it’s news. Like he’s ever playful (anymore). “I --I couldn’t stand losing you to something so--"

Gabe speaks before he’s really thought the words through. “Christ, Jack.” He says. “You couldn’t shake me if you tried.” He says it like he’s forgotten all about the smell of creosote on his hands, and his neck and is thighs. Like he’s forgotten that Jack has lost him before, even if fleetingly.

But Jack doesn’t know that, does he? That’s probably why he looks almost comforted by the words. (And that’s the last thing he should be. )

“I mean it.” Jack says, then. His voice is warmer, but retains that edge to it that’s been present for some years now. “I’ll --I’ll be gone soon.”

There’s never enough time. God, but they had been busier in the crisis, and it felt less like theft of recreation. Back then, every spare moment felt wasted or numbered somehow. But now there’s no imminent end, and they have no reason to confess anything to each other. No reason to abandon their posts. And where once they let survival define them, and later victory, this is what defines Jack, now.

Gabe can’t pretend to be upset about it. He hears his voice when he asks, “When?” but Christ, how can he have the gall to miss Jack? To ask that when he’s put every bit of distance between them there is. The six days that Jack was gone from him --the flowerless grass of the backlot, the arid plains of the New Mexico Dustbowl.

Maybe Jack knows this. He doesn’t wield the knowledge against Gabe. “The morning.” He says, quietly. “Early. I won’t be able to come by again.” Then he’s sniffing again like he’s trying to seem above it all. Funny creature. He used to let himself be so known. “But I --I wanted to see you, before--..."

“Yeah,” Gabe murmurs. Knows to spare Jack to vulnerability of saying it. “I’m glad you did.”

Jack’s head is turned, then a little. They’re looking right at one another, with hardly any space between them.

Gabe doesn’t realise that he’s staring into some silver mirror. Doesn’t realise he’s been here before: two in a bed, one sick, the other salient, above the sheets, looking to save. And isn’t he happy to play Jesse’s part? Isn’t he happy to lift his arm and swipe a thumb over Jack’s mark, gently?

Jack halts his hand by laying it over Gabe’s. That’s all the scene lacks.

There are no words exchanged in this version, though. No darkness by which to ease things along. Jack can see him, wholly, as he is. Takes him at that; and then they’re kissing.

For once, Jack leads. Moves with his hands, finds his way on top of Gabe’s hips and moves gently against it, hesitant and inital but full of a desire that is impossible to misinterpret. How long has it been? The last time might have been in Washington: the world had been so rosy, their future so present and certain, and Jack had been below him in the sheets, bright and soft with growing life, receptive and sensual.

This time Jack is above him, moving with ardor and desperation. The world is no longer rosy, and Jack is dulled like a blade used to cut too many times, the same image but in a new light: this scene a
It’s no less gorgeous when the sheets part, and Jack strips enough by the infirmary light to take his mate, sinking down onto him without a shred of hesitance, taking Gabe in his entirety. On his back, as he is, Gabe can do little to move with Jack, and instead lays back to watch, Jack’s scent only the stronger, the sensation of him around Gabe’s cock all the tighter.

It doesn’t take long for them to settle into a rhythm. The time since their last is easily overcome, and then Jack is leaning forward at that angle he likes, a hand on Gabe’s hip, and a hand over his mate’s heart to steady himself, rocking deeply but slowly, sacrificing speed for depth to take every motion as intensely as possible. Jack is hot and wet and heavenly. The sound alone of Gabe driving into the slickness of his mate comes paired with the noises Jack makes: shy, swallowed noises of absolute ecstasy.

Gabe recognises them, and they come back to him only all the more sweetly, until he has no recourse at all but to lift his hips and fuck into Jack, chasing his own end and desperate to make a mess of Jack—to paint the blush that’s creeping down onto his mate’s chest with his own cum and mark in every conceivable way so there can be no mistaking who he belongs to.

So that they’ll smell alike, too, and he’ll be on and under Jack’s skin.

He keeps his hands on Jack’s waist and tugs him down onto his cock in erratic and sharp thrusts that get to Jack immediately. His back arches wildly and he cries out wildly, without any thought, sounding so fucking pretty as he paints his chest. Gabe feels a hot spurt of it on his own stomach, and looks up to see the mess of it, and how Jack is still arched, overstimulated now, being fucked into raggedly with hardly any awareness.

Gabe knows he won’t last much longer at all, suddenly hungry, so he leans up to reach the back of his mate’s neck and pull him down so that they’re close again, chests pressed against each other. It’s a better angle for him to move, and his purchase increases as he presses his nose once more into Jack’s neck, the scent his undoing, his sharp movements drawing out gasping, overstimulated whimpers.

He hears Jack’s voice between harsh, panting breaths as he pleads, “Gabe—” and they both know what it means, if the pressure in the base of Gabe’s cock is anything to go by, or the way is movements only increase in desperation. He wants to fill Jack up, Christ, wants to stay inside of his warmth for as long as he can.

Jack cries out again like he’s close and then Gabe is done for, really, thrusting up into that sweet slick place and feeling his knot swell and catch on Jack’s tightness, fucking hungrily until he drives himself home, locking them together and releasing with a tight, guttural hiss and dragging Jack right along with him.

The sensation of being filled always did get to him, and Jack barely has a voice left to cry out with, tensing and arching again as he finishes for the second time. It paints them both as they are, chests pressed against each other, enough that Gabe can feel his mate’s heart racing. Not that Jack seems bothered by any of it, either way, boneless above him, still trying to catch his breath, and still sweet and hot around Gabe.

He’s content to stay like that, too, forever. Lucid enough now to appreciate the way Jack is tonight. His tracing-paper skin looks soft in the dim light. His weight on Gabe is comforting and familiar, easy and burdenless. He can trace the planes of Jack’s back and think back on different times.
They touch each other in slow and fascinated motions, as if relearning something forgotten. What is Jack thinking, when he looks at Gabe in these moments? Does he see him how he is, or how he was?

It hardly matters. They’re together, even if it’s only for now. Even if Jack is pulling away, slightly, to whisper, “I’ll miss you.”

Gabe holds onto him. Tries to take his hand but ends up with his wrist instead and is content with it enough to pull. “Stay.” There’s a brief look of conflict that comes over Jack’s features like he’s -- hurt, almost. Like the gesture has come too late. Now that it’s easier to face him, that his pain is less visible, Gabe wants him to stay. It’s not enough.

But then Gabe is murmuring his name so sweetly, tugging so gently on his wrist. Here he is, in Gabe’s space of convalescence -- in his bed and space.

And there Gabe is, wanting him there. Pulling him closer.

It’s inevitable, and Jack knows it, even before he gives up the ghost, fighting his own smile, and this helpless feeling of instinct. To crawl back where it’s safe. To where he belongs.

“Stay.” Gabe says, again, softer.

So he does.

- 

Gabe asked once, very early on, because he’d been curious: what did he smell like to Jack?

It was years ago, then, and they’d been shiny and new to each other: enough so that Jack didn’t have an answer ready. At the time, he’d done his best to open his mouth and make a noise of thought. ‘Birthday’, he’d settled on, first, going to to elaborate, ‘like when somebody blows the candles out on a cake.’

Gabe wasn’t aware of himself, and still isn’t. It’s an adaptation of nature, to be unconscious of your own scent and it’s changes. He’ll never be able to experience himself the way others do: will never be able to look at himself from every perspective. Often only his own.

That’s why he doesn’t realise that Jack is wrong when he describes it like that. Jack doesn’t realise it, either, until he rises from the bed, solitary in the early dawn. He dresses in the presence of his sleeping mate, and slips away quietly, fascinated by it.

Not birthday. Something close to candles, perhaps. Like something brilliantly burning and illuminated has died, and left nought but an ashen wick.

Not birthday, he realises, all the years later. Smoke. Burning.

That’s what Gabe is: not birthday, a gift or a wish suddenly made, but consumption. The memory of something like fire that was there.

But, like Jack, is now gone.

-
Hours later, Gabriel wakes.

Alone, for as to his word, Jack is gone by the morning. Off across the universe, where Gabe can’t yet rightly follow.

It takes waking to know it, because Jack’s scent lingers on the sheets and if Gabe remains sleeping he can kid himself. But maybe he’s been kidding himself too long. Not that it matters, either way. He won’t be cleared to head to Zurich until another three days or so, and even then, he still has things to do here. There would be little point leaving if Deadlock were only to surface again.

He won’t do that to Jack. He won’t let it happen again.

There are a few men from the bunny ranch in lockup, as well as some girls in juvy that might be of some use. Gabe hardly knows if he can face Miss Marie. The very thought of her fills him with distant dread, and how in his memory, she watches Jesse’s body being used before her with some faint disinterest. Like the kid wasn’t her burden to bear so much as a beast to leash.

Prison is too good for her. It would have been too good for Johnny Ringo, too.

It’s what he knows he’ll have to face come the grace period of recovery, so he turns onto his side and lights up a holoslide of his inbox if only to feel less useless here. It feels wrong to lay there no matter the state he’s in while Jack is halfway across the world, facing people who would frankly like to see him dead.

As he is, on his side, he’s reading at sort of an angle, but there’s no angle that could obscure the subject line of the urgent message that sits three lines from the top. In dark overwatch-shade blue he can see the words written. ‘Deadlock Asset’ sits in the subject line. The only thing more disconcerting in the world what precedes it: ‘Sender: Captain A. Amari’.

His heart sinks. His hand is shaking slightly when he opens the email.

‘Gone ahead to induct your Deadlock Asset in Zurich. Will handle the marksmanship assessment and B.L.E.A.T’. Get well soon.

Regards.’

She’s taking Jesse.

She’s taking him right to Jack.

Gabe closes the slide. He stands. He goes to the door, and then down the hall.

There’s blood on the bandage of his chest. He never makes it to noticing.

- 

The leaving is so sudden. Jesse can hardly process it.

She arrives --this Miss Ana, and then they’re gone.

She walks him out of the interrogation room with hardly anymore words. Takes him past the
administrator desk, with no cuffs on, paperwork apparently completed in advance without Jesse’s input. He leaves past the staff with guns on their belts, through doors upon doors when the free people walk through, and now, he’s among them. Hist wrists are free of cuffs. There’s no escort gripping hard on his arm. Nobody but Miss Ana walking in front of him. Leading him out of the building, then.

Is it warmer, now? Breaking June, Jesse takes his first few steps into the sunlight, blinking uselessly. He looks up at the cloudless sky as if to anchor himself under something. The air feels different when it isn’t between fences. Feels clearer. There’s the sort of dust that make him homesick.

He thinks of open highway again. Of his own freedom. He follows the woman sent for him, and they walk between the high chain-link fences of the grounds until they’re past the gate. There’s a car outfront, but Jesse barely notices.

He barely thinks to look ahead at all, far too consumed in hearing the distance between where he stands and the building behind him. ‘Santa Fe County Prison’. It might be a terrible place --Jesse wouldn’t know. He hardly has a basis for comparison. All he knows is that he survived it.

That’s it, before the lady, Amari, is telling him, “This way,” and they’re both disappearing into the black, plateless car.

Jesse can’t remember the last time he was in a car that wasn’t a police car. It hardly matters.

Then they’re pulling away and he can see through the rear-view mirror that the building is disappearing behind him, and with it, the fear of the medical there, or the scarcity of cigarettes, or the rest of it. Then it’s nought but a peck on the horizon, much like he was once, almost unseeable to the unenchanced lens.

Then Miss Amari is speaking again. Jesse is terrified to do anything but listen. “I know this must be a lot to take in.” She says, practically patiently, looking him over with an emotion he might’ve seen on Gabriel before but can’t readily identify (compassion). “You’ll have plenty of time to collect yourself on the transport to Zurich. Until, then, if you have any questi--”

Jesse’s head turns. His curiosity emboldens him enough to look at her. “Zurich?” he asks, with a small and confused voice. “That’s where we’re goin’?”

Jesse tries to put an image to the name. It’s no place he’s familiar with. Somewhere in Europe, he’d venture, but he doesn’t know where. He knows he was born in Tennessee, but he has no memory of it. The lockup is the furthest he’s ever been from home --some thirty miles or something from the gorge and the motel. How many miles to Zurich? How far away will he be going?

Jesse knows it doesn’t matter much when it’s already been decided, but some childish part of him would be eased by the knowing. Any knowing, really.

A smile quirks at her mouth but is mastered very quickly. “Yes.” She says, patiently. Like Jesse’s question and intent is some precious thing. “We have a base of operation in Zurich. You’re likely to be staying there until you have been approved for active duty.”

“What happens after that?” He hears himself ask, before he can help himself. The vehicle shifts and he leans against the door. Miss Amari remains patient in her poise.

“One thing at a time.” She says, easily. It’s said with some seriousness to it. Not a warning --Jesse
can smell trouble a mile off, and there’ none on her. It’s something odd again, like that look of earlier. He hardly knows what to do under such a gaze. “Clearance for active duty takes about six months --at Gabriel’s discretion, of course. There’s little sense in worrying about it now.”

Gabriel. Christ. The leaving had been so quick that the man has slipped Jesse’s mind until Miss Amari mentions him. After all, Gabriel was the one who was supposed to be here today, saying those words, easing Jesse into this strange furlough he has wrought into being. It would make it all the easier, he thinks. With his scent and his broad, easy touches. Jesse doesn’t think he’d be so afraid to follow Gabriel anywhere.

Jesse chances a glance at the window and watches the circuitous blur of red rock and prairie grass pass him by absently. He recognises the landscape but is unfamiliar with this part of the world. It’s unsettling.

A few minutes pass in silence. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Miss Amari working with a holoslide. One of those modern types, without a heavy, fixed projector. It hangs in the air in front of her and she works with it easily. It’s a dark green-gray sort of colour. Jesse struggles to read it. He looks away again.

Then she is minimising the slide and asking him, “Are you hungry?”

Jesse shakes his head. He thinks he might be, but fears his nerves or something far worse and far more dangerous will having vomiting inside the sleek, clean vehicle interior. “M’fine.” He murmurs, indistinctly. “But --thanks, anyway.”

Almost instinctively, without looking up, she says, “Let me know if you change your mind.”

And Jesse’s ears burn to hear that. For some reason he can’t quite place, it makes his ache in a terrible sort of way, and then he’s wishing he knew how to open a window or something just to feel like he can breathe again.

He wonders about all of the other things he’s heard. Did Gabriel come all the way from Zurich every time Jesse saw him? Or are there other places they work out of? Is there one in Mexico? Jesse thinks about that most of all. Of what Gabriel promised him: I can get you to Mexico . He’s made good on most of his words so far. Mendacity wouldn’t serve him.

Jesse just hopes he’ll be quick. He can only keep this up so much longer. Slipping the noose today was just luck. Every day that passes only puts him on thinner ice --he’s convinced by the sweetness in her words and the concern of her gaze that maybe Miss Amari already knows it.

But if she does, she doesn’t say.

It isn’t long after that Jesse feels the gentle pull of the brake and then they’re stopping. Panic rises in Jesse at the sensation of it. Wonders if he hasn’t gotten himself into something worse, but has no time to think about it, because then somebody is opening the door on Miss Amari’s side and sunlight is flooding the car interior.

She beckons him, and Jesse follow her out onto some wider stretch of tarmac with nothing but desert around it. He’s blinded again but the light for a few seconds, lifting his arm and squinting before his overstimulated and helpless sight fixes on something even dark, and larger. It takes him a moment or so to identify what he’s looking at, but it must be an aircraft of some kind. Bigger than anything he’s seen, nothing like anything he’s ever experienced himself.
Miss Amari leads them towards it and up a retractable set of metal stairs that look deceptively flimsy, passing into the inside of the aircraft. Jesse follows her and his surprise only grows.

Inside is incredible: he can see a small, airy space with a fixed holoscreen projector on a low table, surrounded by crisp, leather chairs that are fixed to the floor of the thing. There are panels further back --rooms, likely. He wonders what kind of other amenities they have. It hardly feels like an aircraft should. He can’t see a cockpit. It feels like something else --but Jesse hasn’t been enough places to say.

Miss Amari gets herself comfortable quickly on one of the leather chairs and pulls up a slide that shows a map. Jesse is sheepish to come inside. She’s patient. “It’s ten hours to Zurich.” She says, matter-of-factly. “There are places to sleep in the back, there,” Her hands gestures left, “--if you feel tired. There’s also a space to make food further back, and a small shower room.”

Jesse can barely bring himself to move forward. There wasn’t even a shower back in the motel, in the gorge. He’d had a bath, that was all, and the water hardly ran very hot. The showers in the prison were cold, too, and they ran on tokens, two minutes per token. His mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

It doesn’t seem to phase Miss Amari. Maybe she’s seen this kind of thing before. She looks over the map with minimal concern and says, “One more thing, before I forget. In the first sleeping compartment there is a change of clothes for you.” She slides left, and then the news of the day is being projected before her in dark blue. “We depart in ten.”

She doesn’t even watch him as he crosses in front of her, still slow, and still hesitant. Busy, now, he thinks, enough not to see him as a point of concern or interest. Jesse thinks this might be the first time in his life he’s been looked on like this --aside from his first time meeting Gabriel. He and Miss Amari like both share this quiet sort of dignity that fears or wants nothing, solitary and singular in it’s desire.

Unmonitored for the first time in weeks, he hardly knows what to do with himself. He goes to where the sleepers might be just to be alone. Just to do something.

It’s where Miss Amari had gestured, too, far to the left of the room. There are three or so identical compartments, but it’s the last one that has a folded pile of clothes on the bed. He can see them from the space by the door. The space inside is small once he’s locked himself in, but there’s room enough to lift his arms and take off the jumpsuit he’d been issued, shedding the layer of orange, and the white undershirt, peeling it off disdainfully. He should probably shower. It doesn’t matter now.

Jesse stands in his underwear in the sleeper for just a second. His scratches his stomach nervously. He feels sick with nerves, but not in a way he recognises.

The clothes provided for him are medium, likely a guess. There’s a circular white insignia on both with an orange accent that he thinks he’s seen somewhere else before. He puts the shirt on first to ease some of his nerves, and it hangs on him forgivingly. The pants that come with it are loose-fitting and cotton grey, but they reach his ankles, at least.

A few moments later, he feels a great sort of muffled vibration from beneath his feet, and realises then that they must be departing.

Jesse struggles to think of a time he has ever felt more suddenly terrified. Movement has him falling
back gently into a bunk. He grips onto a corner of the bed for dear life. How can he leave here? He won’t mean anything out of context. And Gabriel will find him out. What, then? Gabriel is the only friend he has.

He’s Jesse’s only hope. Without him, Jesse would just be heading across the world to some great unknown, with nothing and nobody to his name, a mayfly caught on the direction of the breeze. An untranslatable verb.

He realizes then that he might be crying; it doesn’t matter. He keeps his purchase on the bed to lay properly. To bring his knees into his chest and make himself smaller. The elements of the shifting world around him can corrode less of him this way.

Jesse’s eyes close. He tries to think of open highway, again. Stretches of land. The sound of horseshoes on dirt.

And then the day catches up with him, at last.

- 

It is a cold, sharp morning in Zurich when the transport lands.

But in Colorado the midnight heat is sharp and acrid. Keeps cotton sheets and bandages tacky with sweat and slowly yellowing. Keeps some folks indoors, fanning lazily with hands and collars and stray pieces of paper as the AC generator whirs passively.

Gabriel was born of the sun. Of California: long, sweltering summers that turned green grass to a coppery gold. Hose-pipe bans, dogs laying in the shade refusing to give chase and sleeping over the sheets. His blood runs thinner than most. It’s not the heat that keeps him indoors at all, but something far harder to evade.

“Your discharge papers,” The attending physician tells him, like there’s any worth to the sentiment. “--are not ready. You won’t be cleared for transit until -until tomorrow, at earliest.” It’s all that keeps from Gabe from the door. They’d had to sedate him before as he tried to slip away --tried to get to Jesse first, to save his own skin, for one thing, but to save Jack’s for another. “And even then, I--”

“Sign it off.” Gabe growls to him. There is no room to plead. Even if all of his connections burn with the ache of injury, he won’t be made just to sit here. Having some stranger decide what condition he is in is laughable, after it all. How could they possible have navigated the crises without medical clearance, or discharge papers? He’s lost enough time as it is. “I said, sign--”

“I heard you.” The attending says, sharply, and Gabe would be impressed by the backbone of it if he wasn’t so furious, stretched too-thin by his priorities. “But the best we can do is review you for clearance tomorrow.”

But it’s already tomorrow in Switzerland. It’s already morning and Jack is probably preparing to give his statement already and if Jesse isn’t with Ana there, already, then they’re damn close. And here Gabe is, bed-bound, helpless but to tell his the fabric of this all unravel.

There’s no way this is going to go nicely.

But this isn’t Gabe’s first time being cornered.
Across the universe Jack is translucent by technicolour and light, exposed as a white blood cell or the most solid parts of an X-Ray. It is early in the morning, enough that the crowd of press are subdued compared to Washington, grim in the waiting, ready to leap down his throat the moment Jack should open his mouth to speak.

The words have been prepared for him. He is thinking, the moment he begins to speak, that nothing should blindside him today. That he left Grand Mesa with the faint and dreamlike impression of Gabe’s intimacy upon him, that Deadlock’s numbered are depleted and confessions have been signed and he’s far away from it, now; these things all comfort him.

Jack has every fondness and faith in his mate as he greets his audience, oblivious to the boy arriving at the Zurich headquarters, bleary-eyed and coltish, swelling with growing life and doing all within his power to keep hidden. Oblivious to Gabe, as he overrides medical security with a trembling hand, signing his clearance under Angela’s name. Preparing transport.

Jack faces them feeling as if everything is right within the world.

And that’s a mercy, is it not?

- 

Jesse has ever cared for the winter sun.

But it is June here, overcast and somehow morning. His body aches in a strange way, part of him still living on time kept by another life, rested but drained, and terrified to take any steps towards the enormous and beautiful structure he sees before him: a weave of white surface and glass, tall and elegant but no less a fortress in it’s own right.

There’s no neon here. No dust or age of bit of home. All he can recognise is a distant mountain, and even that is of no comparison to home --more salient, somehow, snowcapped and austere. That could be the edge of the earth, for all Jesse knows. For all he cares, too.

He is lead once again by Miss Amari, who shivers, initially, just as he does, but moves out with no hesitation. She seems to note his stillness. She misattributes it. “How do you like it?”

Jesse blinks at her, dully. Unsure of what to say. The last woman he really knew was Miss Marie, and Miss Amari is so --so different, and strange that it’s almost frightening. Jesse only ever spoke to Marie in terms of business: like all else, he was only worth the profit she could make from him. But Miss Amari will ask about other things, and her eyes are elsewhere and her tone is patient. Jesse is so confused.

He wonders if this is how things are supposed to be. He doesn’t remember his mother at all, but the gentle scent of citronella and kindness of this woman make him yearn for something maternal to cling to.

Even when he doesn’t answer, which could be mistaken for dissent, Miss Amari only adds, “You’ll grow to be comfortable here.” Jesse could cry.

He has done nothing for this woman. There’s not even a guarantee that he’ll go on to do something for her. Who is he to her but some whore who got mixed up in all of this strange and grim business entirely by accident? He is nothing. Nobody. Yet, still, she’s turning. Waiting for him.
“There will be time to acquaint yourself with the grounds later.” She says. Her tone isn’t soft, but her words feel as if they are. “There are a few things we’ll need to do first.”

Jesse is too at a loss to argue. The less he says, the better. There could be no quarrel with his silence. Miss Amari doesn’t seem to mind it, as she begins to walk, and Jesse walks behind her, slower, with the relative cold here flaring up injuries he had almost forgotten about. There’s some ache in the back of his knee that hasn’t troubled him for a week weeks, yet. It slows him down.

Miss Amari waits. It takes them only slightly longer to reach an exterior door, which she unlocks with a series of swipes and a press of her thumb. The Jesse’s anchor, the big, austere mountain, disappears, and the door is shutting behind him, closing him into this new life and sealing him there. And his new life appears to start with breakfast.

Jesse eats in a large room that’s loud and warm with conversation, as he listens to Miss Amari explain when mealtimes happen, where to go outside of those times to eat, where food preparation facilities are available onsite and a manner of other things. He tries to take in as much as possible, but can’t help his distraction at his surroundings? He had thought the county prison had been generous enough with three meals in a day, but here?

It all seems so ludicrous, but Jesse has no objections, finishing as much as he can handle until a vague feeling of sickness comes upon him. It’s easy enough to temper.

Miss Amari waits until he is finished to explain things further. There’s no fixed projector and Jesse isn’t even sure how she brings up a slide, but she manages to, and mirrors it so it’s readable to the both of them.

“You have regulation quarters assigned to you.” She explains. “It’s yours to do with as you please. Anything you require you can requisition from the holo-interface.” She stands, then, not tall in height but enough so that Jesse looks up at her dizzily, as if in wonderment. “Before I take you to your room, I understand you may have a few belongings still in our evidencelocker.”

Jesse stands, to, if only to be polite. He could continue to eat. It’s what his instinct seems to tell him. That hardly matters in the face of things. “Like what?” He asks, as she moves towards the door, and he follows.

“I couldn’t say.” She says. “But I’m sure Gabriel would know.”

Something is meant by that. Jesse isn’t sure what, but he keeps the remark in mind. Recalls what Gabriel had said; about conflicts of interests. About secrecy. Jesse’s had all sorts come through his door. He knows how to play possum about a married man, no matter what Gabriel protests to.

He doesn’t have to say anything, in the end.

Gabriel is the furthest thing from his mind when he sees what’s left of who he was: boxed and sterile. All the remains of him. An old revolver. A dreamcatcher. And Johnny’s Ringo’s hat.

Jesse doesn’t think of anything else but the hat when he’s given the go-ahead to free it from it’s confines, working impatiently until it’s in his hands, the weight familiar and comforting, the scent of the alpha ever-so-slightly lingering in the material of it. Johnny used to put it on him, sometimes, when he was getting dressed, and Jesse was free to wander his domain, naked for the hat, basking in
it. The only mark he’d ever get from the man.

Some kingdom. Some prize. He takes it, nonetheless, his stomach stirring, a need within him to make a space for these things that is safe and familiar. An urge to go home.

“If that’s everything,” Miss Amari says. “There’s only one thing left to do today.”

Trusting, then, too trusting --caught by the sentimentality and loss he feels for Johnny, and the ache in his core, Jesse goes without thinking.

And that’s the worst thing he could do.

-  

Gabe is halfway to Switzerland in a shuttle when the blood is drawn.

Not the first domino, but one in a long line. He isn’t aware how he set these things in motion the very first time he looked up at that ‘no vac’ sign in the middle of nowhere, and across the world, the product of his actions lies in the needle plunged into the skin of Jesse’s arm.

It lies in that sample of blood that is ran for testing immediately. Jesse doesn’t even have to leave the room, it all happens so fast. Maybe it’s best he doesn’t. Easier, somehow, that he’s already sitting down when the girl in the white coat returns.

“Your results.” She says.

She gives them right to Jesse, too. Confidential as these things are. Miss Amari is only there waiting to usher him along to his room. It’s not her business what he finds. Not her business, legally speaking, to know anything at all. Jesse doesn’t know if he’s legally required to know, anything, either. All he knows is that he doesn’t want to. Can’t. Not now.

He takes off Johnny’s hat to open the thing and read it. Somehow seems disrespectful to leave it on. He doesn’t know why. It’s not like the contents will surprise him.

Once, Jesse heard that getting news in written format is much worse than by word of mouth. He’s never gotten a letter before. Has never written or been written to. All of the news in his life has been told to him. He always thought that was the cruellest thing, really. How fickle words are. How they leave no mark on anything, nor evidence.

He realises he’s wrong the moment he peers inside.

Not at first, of course, bombarded as he is with words he doesn’t know and values or amounts that mean nothing to him. He tracks the pages for some meaning, and there’s a second when he think he’s done it again: slipped through the cracks. Saved himself, if only for a bit longer.

But there, at the bottom of the page, he sees it. Skims over the values marked ‘L’ or ‘H’ and purely to the handwritten section at the bottom. The worst of it all.

‘Pregnant. hCG levels suggest gestation at 10-13 weeks. Obstetrics session advised.’

He only needs read it once. He knows what it’s going to say. What it’ll mean.
It’s only then he realises how awful news in written form really is. Because the words on the page won’t disappear no matter how hard he wills them away. And he can’t hide them, or pretend to mishear them. Or do anything at all, really, beyond facing it.

What’s the use in hiding it? Miss Amari is going to find out somehow --they’ll tell her, won’t they? They’ll tell Gabriel, too, and then Jesse will be done for.

He thinks of some of the girl of Miss Marie’s who were careless. Improvised circumstances: swollen bellies, long needles. Blood and desperation. Most of them lived, but even then, they weren’t whole in the same way. Hungry customers would smell it on them. Jesse doesn’t want to be among them. He doesn’t.

What if this is all he has left of Johnny? Or of Gabriel, even?

Jesse doesn’t even realise he’s on the visible edge of crying until Miss Amari, from her post by the door, asks him carefully, “Is something wrong?”

Jesse turns his face to look at her, the motion doing nothing for his resolve, turning the woman into a trembling photograph of blurry grief. Just to look at her --so vastly different from Miss Marie: so safe, even after a few hours, at best, of company, Jesse feels like he wants to confess so badly.

Gabriel is God know’s where. And he’s frightened. Scared to all hell. He doesn’t want to face this alone.

Miss Amari takes a step forward as if to comfort him. Jesse hides his face in his hands, unable to face her. How can he? All of this kindness, wasted on him, bought in to be a marksman and sent away as a whore. He doesn’t know which way is up. He doesn’t know if there is an up.

“Wh-what d’I do?” He hears himself murmurs, uselessly. He tries to find his pride. Tries to look up at Miss Amari, coughing to clear his voice so that the question will receive an answer. “What --what do I do ?”

She remains a little ways off from him. Permitting a tiff and measured distance, unswayed by the tears. “Jesse.” She says. “Do you want me to read your file?”

Jesse can hardly speak. He can only nod.

Then she comes closer: only as close and need dictates, before closing her fingers on the file, and withdrawing. Jesse doesn’t look over to watch her read. He can’t, instead to draw himself and and murmur, “What do I do? I-I --I don’t--..." He swallows. “I-I wasn’t sure, an’ --an’ he’ gonna be so angry.”

Miss Amari doesn’t look surprised. That’s the scariest part of all. Her mouth is open, and she gets partway through the word ‘calm’ before his words seem to register. “What?” She asks, after a beat of silence. “Who’s going to be angry?”

“It ain’t my fault.” Jesse tells her, desperately. “The --the supply routes was all messed up, an’ I couldn’t get no preventatives an’ I tried but now he’s gonna know --”

“Jesse.” Miss Amari cuts him off. There’s a desperation to her voice now. Some great concern that is now boiling over into something else. Something worse. “Slow down. Talk to me.” It’s not comforting as before. An order, now: an imperative. Jesse has no other recourse at all. He has to.
“Who’s going to be angry with you?”

“Gabriel.” Jesse murmurs, miserably. “He’ll -- he’ll know I weren’t bein’ careful, an’ -- an’ he’s gonna be so angry with me.” Crying out now, petrified in earnest, Jesse hisses to her, “I don’t know -- I don’t know what to **do**, Miss Ana -- **please** --..”

There’s a lot Jesse doesn’t know.

Like how Ana traced Gabriel’s payphone call back to an address that sits on the kid’s record. How she recognised the scent of creosote on the kid as he was dragged through to medical at the scene of the arrest. How, on the infrared footage, Gabe could have taken the kid down at any minute, but didn’t. How he touched him, instead, so sweetly on the boy’s face.

Even before that, Jack had said to her, in confidence, there was something else going on in New Mexico. Or someone. He’d been **sure** of it.

Gabriel had never approved an asset application so fast as Jesse’s. Short wonder why.

There’s a lot Jesse doesn’t know, that Ana knows. But this isn’t one of them.

This will break Jack. Will hit him like a lightning bolt to the ocean. Crush him swiftly and mercilessly. It will kill him: but will kill him more mercifully than finding out later. Or never finding out at all. Gabriel’s never been one for nerve.

She comes for the boy as sweetly as she can muster, one hand stern but comforting on his shoulder, grounding him like a live current. “You don’t have to worry about Gabriel.” She says. “I promise.”

Jesse can cling to that, and be comforted by it. And believe it, if he wants. Why wouldn’t he? Ana certainly means it. Calms him down enough to escort him to his quarters, and let him be, there, for a little while. The boy plays with his hat and she tells him to try to rest. The matter will be resolved quickly.

That much is true, too.

For, three hours after the news breaks, Ana is sitting in Jack’s office. Holding his hand. Talking to him in a quiet voice.

And two hours after that, with a hurried desperation, Gabe touches onto Zurich ground, without warning or explanation. Oblivious to the words in Jesse’s file: to the small swell of the kid’s stomach and the nervous, jittery tears that come and go in the hours of that early evening. Oblivious to Ana’s words: to Jack’s hard and unfeeling silence in the wake of the news.

Gabe goes to Jack almost immediately, seeking a reprise of the previous evening’s. Unaware, completely, of the danger of it all.

Ana had been right all along when she’d told Jesse not to worry about Gabriel.

Jack is going to take care of that for him.
far less exciting, far more deserved.

not to be too cliché but the response to the last part was everything to me?? i am really moved that so many of you said how much you liked it!! keep doing it and i will keep writing faster and we can all jerk eachother off over this shitfest.

love (and stuff)

Gabe comes upon the evening twilight of Zurich breathlessly.

Old injuries burn under newer, worse ones. There was nothing to alleviate his pain on the shuttle. He’s slept not a bit on the way. How could he?

Limping, and hurried, he comes out into the vastly colder air. There’s a distant structure of the HQ that he struggled towards, alone, without even a bag or some preparation. Walks over the steps that Ana had taken hours earlier with Jesse under her care.

He thinks about Jack. Imagines him being on the lawn to greet them both. Thinks about Jesse, again. It’s impossible to imagine the kid here. Wrong, even. Or maybe that’s evolution of defense mechanism trying to spare him the pain. Because Jesse is here --he walked these same steps, and he must have looked upon the cold, great mountain, capped with snow all year round. Jesse’s here and Ana has done this and Gabe needs to do something.

The relative chill only makes him feel all the sicker. He’s sweating.

He can see the sun balanced just on the peak of the mountain in the distance, ever-so-slightly above. Neither have met or obscured the other yet, and Gabe looks upon and wonders if it’s some cosmic sign, and there’s still time. Some way to avoid the convergence of the twain, or even just some way to rewrite history.

But the merest and sharpest peak of the mountain pierces the cloudy sphere of light before he can pass over the threshold to safety, splitting the orange light, hiding some of it. Gabe watches it, and knows: even if he saves himself today, he knows the length of his luck, and the number of his days. Jack is only happy to relive the past for so long.

And he used to be so forgiving .

Gabe shakes off the cold with less than a frowning second. Signs in on the nearest interface, not far from the entrance where some recruits mill about or pass by, talking amongst themselves, blithely unaware of the greenstick fractures in the foundations of the shoulders this place is resting on. Giving no attention at all to the way Gabe holds his side, woundedly, swiping desperately to select Jack from the personnel list and find his whereabouts.

There’s a sharp pain in his chest, spiking in the lung as he breathes in. What if Jack isn’t alone? What
if Ana is the shadow standing over them both? At Jack’s shoulder, whispering in his ear. She never much cared for Gabe anyway. Outsider that he is. Convicted of all crimes wrought of his designation, none of which were ever his. Until now.

(And Jack never gave her too much pause. Blinded, at first, by love, and then trust, and then time. Jack was never on that side of the gun before.

Until now.)

The system interface highlights an outline in a cross-section of the base map. Some mezzanine communal room that’s either for simulation or exercise. Gabe doesn’t take the time to commit the number to memory. There’s no time.

And he’s right. There is no time. None at all, anymore.

The evening is unnatural and still. Gabe hurries as he can, but it is meaningless. For far above him, to the east, Jesse is already here. Sitting clothed under the faucet of his shower, knees-to-chest as if in imitation of his own child, soaked to the bone. In some unmarked grave even further back to the west, Johnny Ringo is under the desert’s red dirt, decomposing silently.

Small boys are culling watercress on the other side of the mountain, adrowse in twilight hushfulness. Jack is alone: has been alone for hours, now.

And Gabe thinks there is time, then, when he comes upon the sight of his mate, stood southpaw before a lightly padded bot. He thinks there is time and that he can save them both, still. Steps in the door, wincing, and relived, welcomed foolishly by the scent of wintergreen and frost that had seduced him so thoroughly the morning before. Had left him feeling fond beyond any expression of his ramshackle being.

It’s the same fondness that swells in his heart to lay eyes on Jack. Alone, as he is, in a room unusually dim to be training in. Only a single light remains on, above him. Illuminating him in a room that feels potentially limitless in it’s darkened corners.

Gabe steps inside as gently as he can. Easing himself to lean up against a wall. He tries to mask the pain he’s in, for Jack’s sake. Tries to smile when he says, “Don’t let me interrupt you.”

Jack is already looking at him when he says it. And in such a strange way, too, colder than usual, but almost --lost, is it? Like he’s staring down a microscope or the lens of a camera, distant to the object of his sight but no less trying to work out what it is he sees. His arms remain where they are, as with the rest of him, poised as if to strike, but with no tension or readiness. All he seems to be able to do is stare at Gabe.

Unsure of what to say, and suddenly nervous, Gabe pushes himself off the wall, despite the flare of pain, and puts a foot on the edge of the padded section of the floor, testing it’s give before taking a few steps. It’s been years since they worked to train alongside each other. Nostalgia is the only thing keeping Gabe calm as he comes forward, saying, “Remember when we used to--”

Jack’s mouth works quickly. “Stop.” He says. Impassively: coldly, but with all the speed and tone that implies it’s a kind of order.

And Jack’s good at those --orders. Gabe feels himself halt almost immediately. It’s all he’s got to play the fool. To be innocent until there’s proof to the otherwise, and he knows Jesse is smart enough
not to say anything, so he stops. Tries not to look afraid as his mouth opens, despite it all, testing the waters. “Jack--”

“Stop.” Jack says, again. His body relaxes, slightly. His arms drop but his feet stay in the same place. Ready, as ever, to strike, or to retreat. He continues to look at Gabe, then. Unrecognisable, even to his own mate. Older, somehow. The word is neutral and safe enough, and Gabe thinks he can handle this: that it’ll all be okay.

He takes a single step forward the moment Jack’s hand moves.

So Gabe freezes, expecting some show of force, even just in warning. Stays back as if to save himself.

But what he sees then is much, much worse.

Jack had opened up a slide, and the dark blue hologram illuminates them both in cold light. It’s a personnel profile, and a picture of Jesse is at the top. His shot from prison, looking venomous and childish. His eyes stare straight forward as if they are looking to Gabe. There are details to the side of it --the date of his approval for agency, his age, and designation. All of these, damning things.

But none worse so damning than the note, in orange, to the bottom right. Some addendum: ‘--hCG levels suggest gestation at 10-13 weeks. Obstetrics session advised.’

Gabe realises it too late. They speak at the same time.

“Nice--”

“Jack--”

“--choice, Gabe. Really.” Jack’s eyes are so cold. He talks from behind the slide, illuminated in blue, the lines in his face harsh and cold, and hurt. Christ, so hurt. “I was maybe always a little too pushy for you, wasn’t I?”

Gabe doesn’t believe what he’s hearing. Can’t. He wants to take a step back but is stapled to the floor in his own disbelief. “What?” He hears himself ask, uselessly.

“I bet he rolls over nice to present.” Jack tells him. His voice is taught as a bowstring, starting off so quietly and treacherously, blooming into a wild, furious yell. “Did it bother you that I didn’t? You know, if I’d known it was that much of an issue --”

“Jack- -” Gabe steps forward. “I never--”

“You never, what?!” Jack is drawn to pull height, now. His face is red with anger. There are tears distantly threatening to ruin him, even now as he stands there in the dark with Jesse’s haunting image just floating there, in the space between them. Jack’s voice drops several octaves at the initial lack of protest, softening only to ask, “Tell me, then. Come on.”

Gabe swallows. There’s no moment given to him to process it. To think about Jesse at all: how close he is and how frightened he must be. To recall in some hazy recollection the night of the kid’s birthday, or even to wonder if that child is even his. He doesn’t even have a second to hold Jesse accountable for this situation. How else would Ana have known --or Jack?
All he gets to going is thinking about lying, explicitly. About looking to his mate of all these years and betraying all three of them: Jack and Jesse alike, in a single word. Why can’t he? Why can’t he spare Jack some ounce of pain, just this once?

Words fail to come. He looks at the floor.

It isn’t good enough.

“Look at me.” He hears Jack hiss. “Look at me, and tell me--” The words cut off in a harsh swallow. Jack is wrestling with his pride just to speak. “Tell me you didn’t ----...”

But he did. He did, and even if there’s been no direct condemnation by Ana or Jesse or any alike: they both know it. Jack can place that faint and poisonous tang that he’d noticed all those months ago, and there is no defense against that. No defense against this news of Jesse, being here. Jesse; pregnant.

There is no reprieve from the onslaught, inevitable as it always was, warranted as it surely is. Jack hisses at his every wish, like the serpents coiled on his head. Medusa to stand there and demand, through some veil of threatened tears, “Tell me you didn’t fuck him.”

Gabe looks up, cold, as if transformed to stone. Mute as a pebble. A hard marble at the bottom of a fish tank. There’s no sympathy for him at all in Jack’s gaze when he finally meets it, only a cold and solemn fury as he barks, “Say it, for God’s sak--”

“I can’t.” It comes out only after great pressure, like the last few gasps of air from the lungs of a drowned man. What could have saved him --so easily surrendered. There’s no use in holding onto it. Or looking up any longer, so he hangs his head pathetically, trying still to redeem himself in saying, “Jack, I --I’m sor--”

Jack doesn’t hear him remotely. Doesn’t permit the words, turning away to cover his eyes with hand like he can hardly face the world he has found himself in. Can no longer look at that haunting and cruel image of Jesse in the air --or his mate and betrayer before him.

Close to tears and with a terrible warble to his voice, Jack takes in a sharp breath. “And to have to find out about it like this?” He whispers. “From Ana?” The hand covering his eyes drops, and then he’s looking right at Gabe again, with the first of his tears breaking down his face. It takes so much to make Jack cry, yet here he is, for the second time in almost as any weeks, weeping silently and openly, his face turned angry. “You fucking cowar--”

Gabe feels himself take a step forward. Bound, even now, by some code of loyalty deep within him, starting at the root of his mark like he wants to comfort his mate. Like that instinct is ignorant to the cause of Jack’s pain.

The last of his good sense halts him, and all he can do then is stare at Jack’s feet and murmur, “I wanted to tell you, Jack,” it’s the worst thing to say, he knows, but it’s at least true. The moment Jack hears it his mouth opens angrily and Gabe has to hurry just to be heard. “Jesus, I did everything I could to get over here to make sure you didn’t--”

Jack makes some noise of bitter laughter, even as he’s crying. Shaking his head. “And isn’t that sweet?” Teeth work angrily over his lip before he speaks again, like some part of him wants to tear
out a throat. Like he wishes his teeth had never gone into the skin of any neck to begin with. “You hurried here for me, really? For my benefit?”

What can Gabe say? His body is dull and hot with pain, standing there in the cool of the room with no defense. He wishes he’d never come at all. He wishes he were a better man. In a mockery of consolation, he tries to plead. “I never did any of this to hurt you.” Jack takes an angry step forward -he takes one back, quick to speak, raising his hands in some surrender. “I-I --I love you, Jack. I want to figure this out--”

Old words have no meaning here. There is no more awful a word than love, and Jack hears it as nothing more than a bargaining chip. That Gabe loves him enough to sink into another omega so easily makes it worthless.

“Figure this out?!?!” Jack screams in earnest, his face red, tears slanderous on his face now, turning his eyes to shining obscurities. Advancing again, he points a nasty finger to Jesse’s slide. “Thirteen weeks, Gabe. You fucked this --this kid.” Jack sniffs. God, he looks so fucking defeated. So miserable. “You knotted him while I --while I was--...”

Jack can’t even say it. Still not strong enough to think about it. To mourn the dead. Just the thought alone has him staggering back, some instinctive and traitorous hand hovering in the ar at his stomach like he’s going to be sick.

None the stronger, Gabe is why he’s so quick to interject, “That was before I knew--”

“And you think that makes it better?!?” Jack turns on him again. Yells it so loudly that the walls seem to whisper it back and plunges the room into an otherwise tense and horrifying silence. It makes nothing better. It doesn’t change anything. But still, it’s better than saying nothing.

Jack’s anger doesn’t dissolve, but does move him more to tears, and then he’s turning away again to cover his eyes. Gabe can do nothing but witness it. The door to the room is wide open, and yet, nobody can leave. No, he has no choice but to listen when Jack wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, turning back around slightly, sniffing to say, “Did he tell you? The --the kid?”

Gabe opens his mouth to speak too late. Jack lets out some tiny, joyless laugh of bitterness. “That what you were doing in New Mexico for all of that time? To get high and pick out baby names?” He swallows with terrible difficulty, trying to seem at ease, his eyes betraying his heart. “Is that it?”

The onslaught is too much for Gabe. Finding some modicum of courage, at last, he whispers, “I didn’t even know he was pregnant--”

“Couldn’t’ve been from lack of trying.” Jack bites, vitriolically. Turning back fully onto Gabe’s little protest with renewed vigour, sizing his mate up like a snake ready to devour a rodent. “How many times was it?” He asks, sounded suddenly calm. Hollow.

Gabe can hardly stand it. He wants to peel off his own skin.

“Look at me.” Jack says, again. Like he’s oblivious to how painful it is --just the action of looking, “How many times did you fuck him--”

He pleads. “Jack--”

“Answer the fucking question!” Jack bursts back into screaming so suddenly --jesus, Gabe doesn’t
think he’s ever been afraid of his mate before. Yet here lies a stranger of his own making. It’s not Jack with tears on his face and in his eyes. Not Jack standing there asking to know. It couldn’t be. It’s not his Jack, the one he used to know, who sizes him up as he bares his teeth and grinds out. “How many times was it?”

But it is, isn’t it?

And it’s all Gabe can do to look away from him, close to tears himself, and petrified to feel. “Stop it.” He murmurs --no longer pleading or impassioned but --tired. Exhausted from his own fear. Resigned in the knowing that it’s over. Even if he tries to hold on, it is no use, so all he can do is make this as painless as it can be. “Jack,” He says, “You don’t want to ta--”

And all too quickly and spitefully, Jack laughs. “No, I want to talk about it. I’m dying to.” Advances some more with this singular and enhanced sort of disquiet vacancy to his eyes. They still shine with tears, but no fresh ones come, like he’s through with it already. Why wouldn’t be he? He has nothing else to lose, now.

Gabe stands his ground, uselessly. Forces himself to hear the questions.

“How many times did you knot that kid?” Jack asks him, hotly, in some knifelike whisper. “You were there all that time.” He growls. “Couldn’t you get enough? Was it that good?! Did you-”

Here, there is no safe answer. Not even the truth, and they both know it. Honesty would only further twist the knife --that he and Jack tried, consciously, all these past years, and came away with nothing for the longest time while some dope-addled kid from nowhere falls pregnant as if by pure luck. Christ, that’s more painful than any lie Gabe could make up: nastier than the longest affair and more brutal than infidelity of the heart.

The truth is worse than anything Gabe could ever bring himself to do to Jack.

“Once.”

But it’s all he has. Whispering brokenly, now, unable to even look at the face of the man he made a stranger, he murmurs, “It was --it was just once.”

He still doesn’t look at Jack. And maybe that’s for the best, as the words seem to hang there, in the air, like a sword on a string, dangling above them both.

Or maybe that’s why Gabe doesn’t see it coming at all.

Because then there’s the sound of force and skin-on-skin, suddenly, as heat flares violently all over his jaw. He staggers backwards, blindsided off-kilter, nursing his face when he realises what’s happened. Looking quickly and warily back up to Jack where he’s still stood, with his hands in fists, poised like a cobra to strike.

The shrapnel in Gabe’s body sings. He lifts a hand in a gesture of surrender, pleading, “Jack--”

Too late. Years too late.

And then Jack is on him. There’s no reprieve at all: he’s stalking forward on the padded floor as Gabe shuffles backwards, too slow to escape it. Jack’s elbow is drawing back again and there’s bruises sure to bloom in the wake of his knuckles. It comes again, and again, one hand keeping Gabe
from getting away, fisted in his collar, while the other does all of the work.

By the second time his fist draws back, there’s blood.

Gabe rears back desperately, hearing the rasp of a tearing seem after the third punch. Dizzy and sick, he manages to kick out, somehow, connecting with a part of Jack. Then there’s a window. Enough distance between them that he can turn to try to stagger away --towards the door, or something. One of his hands is holding his face together, if the feeling is anything to go by the other. The other feels towards the door.

Jack doesn’t waste time.

Less than a second later he can hear the squeak of skin on the plastic of the mat and a hard swing knocks his feet from beneath him. It leaves Jack above him, with the advantage of height. With the advantage of how Gabe comes down on his side where his wounds are still fresh and he hisses out through his teeth, useless with bright and sudden pain. Unable to get away.

Then a shadow falls over Gabe’s eyes and he knows exactly where Jack is. The hand holding his face comes away as he sees a sharp movement. An errant heel swings sharply to get at his chest, and somehow he’s quick enough to grasp it before the movement can connect. All instinct, he twists at the ankle, and in his indignation to get away, Jack pulls away at the wrong time. He falls back, catching himself on an elbow.

Again, there is no break. Gabe can hear every single one of Jack’s furious, heaving breaths as he crawls back, nowhere near finished. Gabe isn’t quick enough to keep Jack from off of him --left then with the only option but to taste blood and cover himself from the worst of it, because Jack’s always been able to swing a punch but now he has no reason at all, or any sense left, to soften his force remotely.

It’s nothing but hate in every movement. Of how Jack tears his mate’s wrists from his face so he can get at Gabe’s face better. To hurt him worse.

Then he’s elbows, too, and Gabe’s eyes squeeze themselves shut in time to hear and feel something low and muted like a crack. Hot blood on his face --down his cheek as he jerks to get away, only spreading the damage. His vision swims. His nose is broken. Jack shows no signs of stopping.

No, even as Gabe’s hands surge up to try to free his wrists, and Jack fights the movement, bearing down, his mouth open as he heaves these enormous breaths. The light is dim and that personnel file is still filling the room with a haunting blue. Makes Jack looks like he’s almost smiling over his mate --lips parted like the sight of blood spilled causes him a great and visceral pleasure.

Punchdrunk, it’s merely lucky when Jack gives up his pursuit of Gabe’s wrists and instead both of his hands shoot down to claw and grasp the column of his neck. Fingers lock decisively in seconds, hard enough that Gabe can feel his own pulse flickering like a gunnery in his throat immediately -- can feel the pressure of air leave him.

At a loss, he scratches at Jack’s hands as best he can. Tries to extricat the fingers choking him but finds no purchase against Jack’ superhuman inhumanity. His throat burns without any air to it.

Above him, he hears Jack cough out, “H-how was he?!?”

The dizziness of bloodloss to the brain is already coming upon him. Gabe’s mouth makes a word,
but only manages two letters, “Pl--”

Panicked, now --desperate, he fights to get access to Jack’s face. Is short on having the range to punch properly , and is becoming weaker by the second, able to do almost nothing but rake furiously and force the heel of his hand against Jack’s face. It does nothing, and even from behind his fingers, he can hear Jack hiss, “Was he good?”

But it does nothing, and then he feels a tingling numbness in his hands and feet. His eyes burn, and he can feel his head growing heavier and heavier. No air comes in or out, and there’s blood on Jack’s face, and his hands up his arms and --

In some last-ditch attempt, Gabe jerks furiously in on himself, grabbing Jack’s left arm with both of his. It alleviates no pressure, and Jack looks almost relieved until he feels Gabe’s leg come over his shoulder a second too late, forcing down suddenly.

The lock breaks --Jack makes a noise of pain, and then Gabe is free, spluttering out wildly, his breath coarse and unnatural as he sucks like back into himself, careful to keep the force of the armbar locking Jack in place.

There’s a second of peace --that’s it. He notices too late that Jack’s locked arm bends quickly to lock with his other. Frighteningly, quickly, Jack has forced his way from out of the lock, turning in, not out --back for more. Gabe is still reeling from dizziness. He has no real defense left in him.

Jack is back on top quickly, using one foot to trap Gabe’s left wrist out to the side, and both hands for the other. The weight on him leaves Gabe effectively pinned --he’s barely breathing, yet, when he realise what Jack’s doing with his arm --the right wrist pressed to the mat, Jack’s other arm coming underneath to fold his elbow up and up and up and--

Snap.

Gabe screams.

The shock of it is somehow a mercy --he manages to wrench his other wrist free to force Jack off of him. It covers the pain of it but not the sensation. The shoulder must be dislocated. The arm, broken.

There’s a moment of silence as he lays there, gasping out breaths, holding his arm pathetically, that he thinks it’s over. That Jack is done with him. With all of this. That he’ll head for the door.

But at the end of his stride, Jack turns on his heel, and Gabe realises that he’s merely --merely waiting. Stalking the mat.

There’s blood on his face that looks purple and strange in the light. He spits some out passively onto the floor. “Get up.” He mutters.

Gabe isn’t sure he can stand, at this point. The bandages under his shirt feel hot and moist. His shoulder and arm on one side are hot and unusable. Swelling already setting in there, and across his face, too. The blood on his face is smeared.

“Jack.” He croaks out, hoarsely, clawing his way onto his front.

Jack turns on him. “I said get up.”
His voice is wrecked, too. Utterly. Different from anything Gabe has ever heard. How long has he had the search party out for the ghost of the boy he used to love? Too long: the foreigner before him spits blood again.

Gabe doesn’t get up. Can’t, even as Jack comes upon him, still heaving.

There’s some noise from out in the hall. Footstep on floor. Voices.

Too late to save him when Jack brings down a foot with a sharp cruelty, hard onto Gabe’s chest. The first is enough to have Gabe cry out, and with his only good arm he tries to reach up and protest, only to have his hand stamped on before it can get anywhere. Jack puts all of his weight on it, too, crushing the fingertips beneath his heel as his other foot comes down again, and again, and--

“That’s enough!”

There’s a sharp noise of surprise and then Jack is staggering backwards. Tugged, Gabe realises, as his eyes open, and he curls in uselessly as if it will wave him, by Ana. Of all the strange saviours, it’s her who clamps her hand on Jack’s bicep and pulls him backwards.

Blearily, Gabe lifts his spinning, foggy vision and sees multiple figures at the door. The shock of blonde that he recognises as Angela is among them. Royal blue of generic Overwatch uniform. Other agents shoulder-to-shoulder with her, all watching. Jack never did like to make a scene --yet, here he is, being dragged away from a fight by an subordinate like some hotheaded rookie. It looks like a schoolyard scrap. Not the scene of the betrayal that Gabe knows it is.

Even with those watching, and even with Ana on him like that, Jack is delirious is his anger, shoving Ana backwards.

He looked fit to protest a second before, but the moment it happens --the moment he wilfully pushes her, the atmosphere changes. That sacred relationship of theirs borne out of designation is discarded in that gesture. Gabe is still with it enough to see that much: the way one of Ana’s feet draws back so she can size him up. Her shoulders square.

She will shoulder this pain with him later. But this isn’t the time, or the place, or the circumstance.

And Gabe might never know why: but he knows, the moment that Jack’s head dips in defeat and her hand comes up to touch him again that she has almost certainly saved his life.

Then it’s over, somehow. He has no recourse at all but to lie there, ribs certainly broken, his left arm useless, his face swelling and bloody, a fixed spectator in the way Jack’s emotion seems to overcome him again. Gabe is forced to watch the way Jack’s knees sort of go and he falls into Ana’s patient embrace. Sees how she permits it, with a tired kindness.

Like she always knew this day would come.

Faces still linger by the door. She deals with that in the same efficient sort of way.

Turning her face, she speaks loudly and sharply, “Don’t you all have places to be?” It startles most of the onlookers enough that they start scattering. They scatter even faster when she calls out again. “Angela.”

There’s the noise of low and distant chatter. Of withdrawing footsteps. It comes as no mercy.
Because then Angela is there at his side, on the mat, assessing him with terrified eyes. Then Jack is crying, again --maybe, hiding what could be tears of what might be pain.

Above him, Angela sends for assistance. Ana begins to lead Jack away.

His footsteps drag on the floor’s padding. His figure shrinks before Gabe’s helpless sight, and all the while, he can do nothing but watching, willing words to come from his wrecked throat --desperate just to say something. To apologise: if it isn’t already meaningless.

His lips part. He chokes on a breath, too quiet to get Jack’s attention. Too pathetic to communicate his meaning. It’s all he had in him, and it isn’t enough, because then Jack is gone, replaced instead by two or three of the onsite medical interns.

And Gabe never gets to say it; in the end.

- 

It takes two hours, more or less, for Ana to feel comfortable leaving him.

She has sleep to catch up on. Things to do, and people to meet. A ship to steer in Jack’s stead (largely) as it takes on water.

It is as gently as possible that she does it, too. Their last cups of tea have long since cooled and Jack’s expression is less watery than before when she chooses the moment, still holding his hand, stroking the back of his knuckles like she is trying to tame a wild animal. The squeezes before she lets go.

He’s seen her do it to Fareeha before.

“‘You need to rest.”’ She says, quietly. Wisely. “‘We both do.’”

Jack looks at her in utter despair. They were in this same room, hours earlier, when she knocked and he’d been so --so happy, of all things, to see her here so soon. God, he wishes, now, that she’d never come. That he’d never asked her to take a seat. That he’d never pushed his teeth into Gabe’s skin at all.

But wishing is meaningless when all his hopes are in the past tense. Isn’t it better this way? He tries to see things with perspective. He tries to pretend that this is for the best, but he can’t stop wondering where he would be, right now, if Ana never did come by. Would he be in bed next to Gabe? Still awaiting his mate’s arrival, with dreamlike and sweet recollections of their last meeting?

He thinks of their bed, again. Of that faint and dusky scent Gabe had tracked in with him more than once, all the way under the sheets. Jack had taken his word, when Gabe had said there was nobody else. Had believed --because, Christ, Gabe was never weak enough to lie. How long would he have let Jack cling to that? How long would he have made a fool out of Jack’s optimism and love?

Eventually, he manages to nod. “Yeah.” He says, noncommittally. “You --you’re right.”

Ana leaves him, too, then. Alone in his office, where he remains, initially. Frightened to go back to the room he left here six months ago and face old memories. He delays the inevitable.

He suspends Gabe from duty. Two weeks, at least. If he’s even recovered by then. Blackwatch activity will be pretty much frozen, then, making his latest asset a bit of a problem in terms of responsibility. The last thing Jack wants to have to do is read the kid’s name, or see his face. Or think
about him at all, really. But Blackwatch will be on ice for the next fortnight, and Overwatch is no place for a criminal.

So he assigns temporary jurisdiction to Ana.

Stands, then. Turns the lights of his office off until he’s standing in dimness. Walks himself the six seconds to the door, and then out into the empty hall. It’s night here, now, having just gone the darkest part. Floor-level safety lighting is all that anchors him to where he stands.

He should head up. Sleep, at least. The morning is wiser than the evening, after all. There’s nothing more he can do, tonight. His heel turns up, towards where he sleeps.

But he goes left, instead. Down towards one of the communal kitchens in the east wing.

It’s purely for distraction. He’d like to be alone in a place of neutrality --where Gabriel’s presence doesn’t linger. But when he comes upon the room, he realises his mistake too late.

The light is already on. Inside, there is a figure swamped in one of the regulation windbreakers. Jack can only see the back of the figure, and nought more, but puts the pieces together quickly: the rucksack by the pair of feet being stuffed full of the MREs being shovelled hastily from the cupboard. A rolled up bag of linens that have been shucked off of a standard bunk.

Jack knows an improvised escape plan when he sees one.

There’s a second, too, when the figure is blithely ignorant to his presence. But then Jack takes a few steps inside and the motions stop. The figure turns.

Gabe’s kid is backed into a corner of the kitchen looking like a cornered animal. He: the prey. Jack: the hunter.

It’s apt beyond measure.

“I-I weren’t--...” The kid squawks, then placing one nervous foot in front of the bag like he’s terrified Jack is going to snatch it. “I was jus’ lookin’ for--”

And Jesse McCree is a thief of biblical proportions. A whore and a murderer and an accessory to the backlash Jack has received, nonstop, on account of Deadlock. Jesse is everything Jack should despise in that moment: the way his lineless face holds itself in some look of terrible fear. How familiar his scent is. How Jack can look at him and smell life on him. How he can think, despite himself, and despite it all: that’s what I should look like, now. That’s how pregnant I should be.

Jesse is the face of Jack’s every anguish, and paranoia, and hatred.

But he’s just a kid. He’s just a kid like Jack was, once, and of all the stupid things Jack feels for him; anger somehow doesn’t number there. Pity, he thinks. Remorse. Jealousy, too, but even then: at his worst, the kid is guiltiest of doing his job, and nothing more. It’s not his fault he’s been caught in this crossfire.

Eventually, Jack speaks. “It’s two days by foot through the mountains each way.” He says, quietly. Calmly. Staying where he is in the room so as not to alert the kid, before withdrawing slightly. “Take
waterproofs, at least.”

Jesse doesn’t seem to recognise him all that much. Christ: he probably doesn’t even know who Jack is. Doesn’t know how deeply and cosmically he has wronged this man.

He doesn’t think to salute, either. But Jack can learn to let it go.

He drags all of those thoughts to the door with him, suddenly not hungry. Suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue. He makes it all the way to the door before the kid interjects.

It’s some forced noise of breathless laughter. Trying to play the scene off. “I wasn’t --wasn’t gonna try to--”

Jack cuts him off. “I didn’t see anything.” He looks over his shoulder again at the kid, but can’t stand the sight for long at all. He thinks of Gabe. He feels sick. “Goodnight, Jesse.” He forces himself to say.

He thinks about saying something else.

But he loses his nerve.
The darkest part of the night has just passed.

Jesse waits for it --for the first signs of daybreak. And then he slips out through the door he came in. The night is bitterly cold. Wintry to his sensibilities, and even in the windbreaker he’d found, he shivers. There’s a sharp sort of breeze that’s maybe tied to the altitude here, or maybe they’re just at some terribly northern point on a map. Jesse doesn’t know anything beyond the bag he’s got, stuffed with the food he could find. Blankets, too, that he’d stripped from his bed. A lighter he found left on a chair --presumably discarded.

Jesse doesn’t know anything beyond that. Doesn’t know, in any certainty, what they’ll do with him now the truth is out there. Writ on some page that he can’t burn or erase. Prison is his best guess. His only, really. What good is he to them like this? To anyone?

He won’t make the mistake he made last time. Won’t wait for Gabriel to rescue him. Jesse doesn’t do well behind bars. And maybe he doesn’t know what language they speak beyond the mountain range. Maybe he doesn’t have any money to his name or even a friendly, solitary cigarette. But it’s a plan, isn’t it?

Not perfect: not much of anything. But it’s the one he’s got.

The fresh air he’s stepped out in into has granted him no more clarity. The lights of the building light the tarmac out here, but where grass skirts off and slopes towards the mountains, there’s nothing but starlight as guidance. Jesse wonders if daybreak will ease his journey over the summit: but he doesn’t know when the sun rises. He doesn’t know anything about climbing.

Trying to inspire boldness within himself, he wills himself to walk away from the safety (if he can call it that) of the building behind him. Walks, until he is in full view of the salient, austere mountain at his back. The moon is behind him, too, causing a faint shadow of him to fall in front, striding to greet him.

Then, he stops.

Because, God, even if Jesse makes it over the range: lasts the two days on foot he was warned about, then what? He only knows of two ways to make money. How much longer until he’s back in prison? Or worse?
It’s not --it’s not like Mexico is over that hill. Or that Johnny is waiting for him. They’re even further away, here. It could be a million miles away, and here, they’re going to send him back to prison and then the county warden will know and Jesse will lose the last piece of home he’s got left: the last piece of Johnny.

It’s sort of strange to think of it as a baby, even though that’s what it is. Impossible, really. Jesse has been sure for weeks, now. But seeing it in writing. Being given some number of weeks. It’s all the stranger.

A large part of him dreads the situation: pregnancy an instinctive and natural fear to him after all these years. It was the darkest sort of terror Miss Marie ever warned him of, over any sort of sickness. And even away from her, the idea that his body isn’t really his, and won’t be for the foreseeable future --it leaves sickness rising in his throat.

It’s a large part --but it’s not all of him.

Jesse doesn’t think he can remember a time he’s ever been around any kind of children when he wasn’t one. He’s seen them from distances or in passing. On television and advertisements, but his life has been so wholly removed from it, really. That was never a problem, either. Jesse has never wanted a damn thing but a wide stretch of Mexican land and a few good horses. Never wanted Zurich and never wanted to lose Johnny and never asked for this.

But then Jesse thinks about Gabriel. About all those promises he was made, and then he thinks, he wouldn’t mind so terribly if he made it to Mexico like this. Wouldn’t mind a bit --not even for a second, to have Gabriel’s mark on his neck, or his hand on Jesse’s hand. Wouldn’t even mind so much to have Gabriel’s baby, when it comes to it.

(Gabriel is the kindest person he thinks he’s ever met, besides Miss Amari. He’d be a good father. A good mate, too. )

Sentiment gets the better of Jesse for all of a second. But only for a second.

Who is he trying to fool? It’s state prison regulation, as far as he could come to understand, to segregate by designation as a preventative measure, and when that fails, termination is protocol before 14 weeks. Jesse doesn’t know a lot about ethics, or who gets to decide them. Doesn’t know it to be any better that they’d force him through the rest of a pregnancy and then wrench the child from him for the sake of them, either.

One of his hands feels over the coat at his stomach. He wonders if this will garner him mercy: or if it’s his most terrible and singular mistake.

God, he doesn’t know what to do. Or where to go. All this time, he has just been standing here. The moon has migrated to the other side of the mountain’s peak. Daylight has drawn ever-so-slightly closer, and he’s still here. No further than before, even with all this thinking.

He should do something. Decide.

Leave, already.

He traces the tarmac with a foot sheepishly. He makes a move to go forward.
“I wouldn’t.”

Jesse turns his head. Feels perpetually snuck up on here, and prepared to fight or get away quickly. But there’s no confrontation in the form of Miss Amari as he turns to find her, as she is, in a loose cotton shirt, under a coat, looking unreadable. She’s only half in the light of one of the tarmac’s floodlights. Were she a foot further back, Jesse would hardly see her. Probably didn’t: knowing his luck.

He turns his face away and looks back towards the distance, like he’s still considering escape.

But she seems to see through it in a single second. Makes no move to stop him. Merely yawns, murmuring. “Much as I’d love to see you attempt the climb in those shoes of yours, child--” There’s a shuffle, and before Jesse has done much of anything (let alone move), her hand is on his shoulder, “--I fear you’d do more harm than good.”

He tenses under her touch. He boils.

“M’leavin.” Is all he can muster. It’s all he can think to say, because, Christ: it’s all he’s been thinking since he was in that room with her, reading the same piece of paper. Best to get it over with quickly, he thinks.

Miss Amari doesn’t let go of him. But her touch doesn’t increase in force, either. Spooky woman she is, murmuring. “Is that right?” There’s a faux-innocence to her voice, like it’s playing at real curiosity instead of derision. “What is your plan, I wonder? Climb the mountain range? Head to Germany? Or catch a train to the south of France?”

She’s still speaking as he tries to shake her off, miserably, cutting in, “Get offa me!”

She does no such thing, clutched tight to his upper arm, continuing to talk. “And miss out on this trip of yours?” With a harsh tug, she turns him around, then, so that the most prominent of the mountains is back in his eyeline. Staring down at him with the hate of some great dissolution. “I don’t think so.”

Jesse is forced to look at her like this, as she stands before him, tugging him down to her eyeline. Her gaze leaves no room for argument, sharp and cold as the night but at least to the point. There’s no austerity to it --but authority. The kind that accompanies all of her actions, and were Jesse the slightest bit less afraid or the slightest bit more grounded, he could kid himself into thinking she has his best interests at heart.

But he can’t --because he isn’t, so he digs his nails hard into the hand on his left shoulder and tries to jerk back again. To hurt her enough to escape. It hardly works, and like a cornered animal, Jesse bares his teeth enough to hiss, “Y’cant keep me here--”

“No.” She cuts him off. Frighteningly calm. Solid and cool as the shade of a rock. “No, I can’t.” Her head tilts. “But then what?”

Jesse doesn’t even think to answer her. He’s sure it’s not a question, but then she’s still looking at him like that. In this way nobody’s ever looked at him before. His desperation fights with his fear. He wants to trust her almost as much as he wants a way out.

Then her voice drops, so it’s quiet as a conspiracy, and there’s something like concern in her eyes, “Are you afraid you aren’t safe, here?”
It’s terrifying that she knows.

Vulnerability is a weapon. Jesse isn’t new to this: he knows when to bare his neck and be honest, and that time isn’t now. His mouth stays firmly shut. He gives up trying to remove her hands. Gives up everything but his silence: fully prepared for that to make it all the worse. For something in her composure to break.

But then, it doesn’t. She looks him up and down with a sigh and releases her hands.

Jesse takes an instinctive step back. But he makes no move to bolt. Still under her watchful gaze. Still afraid.

(The last time he tried to run, he remembers the crack of a rifle. Hot blood. Going down on the dry, cracked earth, and trying to drag himself the rest of the way. His knee has never been the same since.

He had thanked God at the time, or whatever providence there is that the shot had missed. clipped his leg, and not somewhere more important. But, all this time, he should have been thanking Ana.

Because Ana doesn’t miss.)

There’s some look in her eyes, then --something like familiarity or assessment. Jesse doesn’t know how he should prepare to feel, and so he has no defense for the way she lets go of him and cants her head gently to say, “You want to go back. You think it will be safer there.”

Jesse’s mouth opens and closes. He thinks of red rock. Humid nights. The safety of intermittently-buzzing neon: how comforted he feels by it. And how strange. For the first time in his life, the broken sign that tells of ‘no vacancy’ has meaning. Can he go back? Even if he found away --would there be anything left there?

His heart must betray his eyes, because Miss Amari pulls back with some small but assured nod. And he hates so much that he knows nothing here --that everyone else seems to hold all the cards that he can’t help but to mutter, “What the hell d’you know about it?” He barely swallows to speak. “You ever even been to where I’m from?”

Miss Amari’s mouth quirks like she wants to laugh. That would be about the cruellest thing she could do.

And she doesn’t, in the end.

“I’ve been.” She says, then, folding her arms over her chest easily. With the ease and confidence of a woman who knows exactly where her charge is going to wander: like she’s so damn confident Jesse isn’t going to cut and run. “So I know about it.”

Jesse thinks about the day he lost Johnny. There had been so many people --flashes of blue among the dust, disorienting and confusing. He hadn’t known to look for her. Or anyone, really.

“I know that to navigate that climb you’d need a lot more than bedsheets and rations, too.” She says, next. Not unkindly, but with limited patience. It’s not the nicest time of night to be out, and of all reasons, for a kid she barely knows. Jesse never asked for this, though. He never asked for anything. “And I know why you feel like this.”
That has Jesse bristling. “Yeah?” He asks her, miserably --his tone all sharp. “An’ why’s that?”

“You’re nesting.” Miss Amari says, ruefully.

Jesse swallows. He feels himself almost recoil. “I --I’m, what?”

Miss Amari doesn’t look the least bit phased by the panic in Jesse’s face: or the way he keeps looking over his shoulder, judging the distance between here to there. Doesn’t look bothered at all beyond the triviality of the cold. Like this is so easy and obvious to her to lift her chin again and tell him, “This place is unfamiliar to you. Your nesting instinct is to find somewhere safe to be.”

She says it so gently, too, in a way that shouldn’t have Jesse’s gut twist rebelliously in anger. But it does --he does, resenting every word of it, and every word further.

“And I can assure you, that whatever you find out there will be no kinder than here.” She says that much without any room for argument in her voice. Jesse has recognised its use before: for when she lays down the law, and he’s useless but to hear it, resistant to the last as he interjects.

“I won’t find a cell out there.” He tells her.

It’s like some magic word, and then Miss Amari’s face is kind again. Her mouth opens and her voice trickles out softly, this time, maybe from pity or maybe from strategy. “You won’t find one here.”

Then, almost casually, she laughs, “Goodness, child, do you have any idea at the expense it took to bring you here?”

Jesse’s mouth opens and closes. He feels pained. “That was--” To say it aloud, he thinks, is the hardest part. His mouth barely makes it around the implication. “That was b’fore you knew.”

Miss Amari laughs again --spitting Jesse’s every concern with the ease of it. Like this is all some childish game and not a matter of escape. Did she ever even believe he’d leave?

“Far be it from me to steal your thunder, habibi,” She shakes her head, “But you aren’t exactly the first expectant agent we’ve had in our charge.” Her arms come unfolded and she reaches her right one out towards him as if to brush his arm in some gesture of faith. Jesse watches her carefully, but permits the touch. He fears he can do naught else. “We are prepared to accommodate your wishes, whatever you decide to do. But we won’t send you away.”

Deep down, Jesse longs to be comforted by the words. Would love nothing more than to rest easy under Miss Amari’s watchful eye: even if she is sometimes cruel, and derisive. But she isn’t his god here, nor he her charge, anyway.

He sniffs. Gives the mountain another cautious and watery look. “What about Gabriel?”

His fear is contagious. For a second, Miss Amari’s look of mastery and control slips, and he sees this cold light of concern enter her gaze, as if reminded of something distantly horrifying. It’s gone quickly, and it’s only for a second. But Jesse knows what he saw.

“You’ll be under my jurisdiction for the next two weeks.” She says, once that look in her eye is all but gone: replaced by something newer, harder. “I wouldn’t worry about Gabriel, for now. Let’s just worry about getting back inside.”

The hand on his arm applies minimal force, as if to guide him back towards the mountain and the
distant lights of the building. It looks much warmer in there. By now, Jesse’s fully shivering. He feels hungry, too. That’s what does it—the coercion of imagining himself higher, where the wind is sure to grow more bitter, huddled in on himself in some dampening bedsheets, eating dry oats from a foil box.

He puts one foot in front of the other. He starts to walk back.

Miss Amari goes with him in silence, lingering slightly behind him as if prepared for a change of heart. It doesn’t feel threatening, as such. Maybe Jesse’s just too trusting too quickly: but everything she’s said makes sense enough to him so far. There’s no reason for him to argue. At least, not to her.

They’re nearly at the door when he gets the nerve to speak again, afraid to close his eyes to this new and strange world without some answers, at least. “Does--does he know? Gabriel?”

Miss Amari’s jaw tightens. She looks haunted, again. Maybe that’s just how the artificial lights blanch her expression, as they come upon one of the outside doors.

“I think so.” She says.

Jesse has no idea if that news is good, or bad. He feels distantly conscious of his own stomach, like he’s swallowed an anvil.

Miss Amari gives no word of guidance either way beyond that. Maybe that’s a good thing. Jesse doesn’t know.

They walk the rest of the way in silence. It’s warmer inside, with dimmed footlights to guide the way to the elevator, and then silently up half-known corridors (ones with red accents, and not blue, as if distinguishing which side Jesse is on) to the room he was earlier assigned. To what is now supposed to be his home. He still doesn’t know the number, and would have walked past it, were it not for Miss Amari’s intervention.

She has the door come to in a practised and small motion of the hand. Jesse feels her watch a he takes a few hesitant steps inside. The place is just as sterile and unfamiliar as he’d left it, and he can see as much when the lights come up gently and seem to frame the sight of Johnny’s hat, sitting solitary on the bed. At rest. Forgotten.

“Get some rest.” Miss Amari tells him, still waiting in the door. “It’s a big day tomorrow, and tonight isn’t a night for making decisions.”

Jesse turns back toward her when he realises what she’s implied—about tomorrow. It must be the early hours of the day, by now. How much time does he have before things have to be decided? He can’t think of what else she might be implying by that sort of talk. ‘Big day’ indeed: he wishes, for once, he knew what was in store for him with more than a few hours notice.

He even gets to opening his mouth to ask, before Miss Amari drops her head and yawns again. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Some strange ally: she turns to go and fear flares in Jesse again, at this strange and unfamiliar place and his equally strange and unfamiliar fate. He thinks to say something, but what would he say? Miss Amari has an answer for everything. It’s inevitable that she’ll leave him here. That he’ll have to climb into that bed and he’ll have to close his eyes and the the cold sun will rise just to spite him, and tomorrow will come no kinder.
Jesse watches her form in the door as she nods to him, maybe kindly.

The door closes quickly. And then he’s alone.

The moment he is, Jesse thinks his legs might fail beneath him. Thinks he might drop dead on the spot, but he doesn’t. Thinks he might be sick, too, but he isn’t.

No, he just remains where he is. Disoriented and just as frightened, in a windbreaker that’s too big for him. Alone in this strange place. Jesse looks about helplessly. Doesn’t know how to quell the anxiety Miss Amari had identified in him. He thinks Gabriel’s scent would help. Something to ground him, appeasing some ancient instinct he is barely aware of to worry over his safety. The illusion of safety --but then he remembers that Gabriel knows, and it leaves him stranded for options.

As a last resort, he comes to sit shakily on the edge of the bed. He picks up Johnny’s hat in trembling hands and dusts the rim absently.

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” He murmurs, eventually.

It takes him many hours to manage those seven words.

-

The next day is by far the strangest of Jesse’s life.

And it’s a first for Miss Amari, too. She’s never run the B.L.E.A.T. before.

It’s a cloudy morning they begin: the kind he imagines is common to a place like this, grey and overcast enough that Jesse can’t tell what time of day it is at all. The sky and sun are unreadable from the time he is roused (after ten minutes of rest, at best) and hurried through breakfast (of which his dishwasher stomach can take no bite) to the time Miss Amari leaves him at a nondescript door in a nondescript hallway on the other side of the building.

She hasn’t said anything, really, all morning, her body tight and distracted like there’s someplace else she ought to be. It lacks the clear-cut and sharp authority of her presence at the prison.

There’s something she’s worried about --or someone.

“This is where I leave you.” Is what she says, when they’re at the threshold of the door. A door anything or anyone could be behind. That thought must come across Jesse’s face in some way or makes him look momentarily stricken, as Miss Amari is quick to assure him. “You’re just going to be taking a test. No cause for alarm.”

Jesse wonders if a test is the same kind of thing as an initiation. He’s familiar with those --remembers his first tests for Deadlock, running packages of cocaine or smuggled blueprints in a waxed canvas backpack. Then, later, his initiation for Miss Marie, being watched to see how he could perform. To see how much he could be worth.

The thought sits disruptively, right behind Jesse’s left eye. He looks to Miss Amari worriedly. “What kind’a test?”

She’s looking down at her watch almost scornfully. He’s definitely keeping her. “A long one, I’m
afraid.” She says, and then looks up. Jesse might think she was beautiful if she weren’t also so terrifying. “It’s just a series of tasks. Nothing too invasive.”

The word only has him worrying all the more. Miss Amari sees that much, too, perceptive to his concern before he’s managed to find words for it.

“Nothing medical.” She says, quickly. “It’s just an assessment of your skills.”

Jesse shifts his weight from foot to foot nervously. He doesn’t know about his skills. The only thing he was ever really good at besides shooting isn’t something he can imagine would be much use here. Hell, he was almost proud of himself ‘til the day Gabriel came along, and looked him over with those wistful eyes and said ‘you could do something else’ like what Jesse had been doing was so dirty and pitiful, and shameful.

“Will I get t’shoot?” He asks her, quietly. Terrified that this will be the latest in a long line of cruel tricks. That after all he told that pretty blonde and after all he’d told Gabriel, his shooting won’t be good enough. He’ll miss, and that’ll be it.

Miss Amari looks distracted once more, worrying her glance over Jesse’s shoulder and then back down at her watch. “That’s part of it.” She says, and then moves past him slightly, with her hand brushing his shoulder, warmly. “You’ll get full instructions once you’re inside.” Then she turn back to face him with a tight look of appeasement. “Normally I’d escort you in, but there’s --I am needed elsewhere, I’m afraid.”

Then she’s stepping away --her touch is gone. That sweet and comforting scent of citronella and wax is slightly fainter than before and it sort of frightens him.

Jesse looks to the door and then to her helplessly. Wanting to ask her to stay but unsure if he is even allowed.

Again, she seems to sense it, and hesitates in her stride to go. “The quicker you get started, the sooner you’ll be done.” She says. It’s supposed to be comforting. “Go on.”

Jesse doesn’t realise have a choice in this much. He feels himself nod.

Miss Amari waits on that much. The gesture seems to please her enough, and then she nods back to him, looking stricken by something --haunted, or something, still. Something that’s distinct from this situation. Something that must be awful if it’s enough to drain some of the colour from her face. Jesse doesn’t see her as the type to scare easily.

Then the scent of airy citrus is almost entirely gone, and Jesse is helpless but to watch her as she strides off down the hall, her movements powerful and purposeful but with all the poise and grace of a degas’ dancer.

He’s left alone. Or, as alone can be, these days. Jesse’s hand traces his stomach, more present than he remembers or feels it should be. His other hand reaches for the door.

Inside is empty.

Jesse barely knows how to use fixed slides.

He hardly knows what to do with himself, then, when he enters the room and he’s greeted by an
unfixed slide, and a disembodied voice.

‘Hello, Provisional Agent McCree.’ He hears, in a friendly, but notably artificial voice. Feminine. Nobody ever uses his last name. ‘I am Athena. I will be guiding you through the Blackwatch Liaison Expertise and Aptitude Test, also known as the B.L.E.A.T.’

Jesse looks to the door antsy. He’s ever done any test before beyond tests of loyalty. And while moving product or playing lookout is experience in itself, he’s sure it isn’t the right kind. If he’s known there was a test, he’d have spent last night doing something beyond trying to escape.

‘The B.L.E.A.T. is comprised of five sections which each contain a series of tasks. These sections are as follows: logical/nonverbal reasoning, undercover operation, tactical counterintelligence, resource management, and physical aptitude with marksmanship.’

It isn’t said quickly, per se, but there is so much information that Jesse feels a little affronted. His thoughts don’t get much past ‘tactical counterintelligence’. He only remembers to be relieved to hear about marksmanship when the voice has started up again.

‘These tasks will increase in difficulty proportional to your progress. We will also use predictive analysis on your performance to gain upper and lower bound measurements of your ability, so do not be concerned with exhausting yourself.’

Jesse lets out a whistle. He looks around the bare room in a brief sort of confusion. There doesn’t seem to be anything to interact with: nor anyone watching him. Just a long box in the back corner of the room. He wonders if he’s in the right room. There’s not much time to wonder. He turns to look at the door, and when he turns back, he can see the slide has broken up into a series of shapes --parts, if he’s not mistaken. In the centre, there is the outline of a handgun.

‘We will be starting with logic/nonverbal reasoning. This is your first task: assemble to holographic gun correctly. You will be timed, starting when you are ready.’

He stares at the outlines of the parts. Useless without assembly. Generally large, though, friendly shapes. If he does well, he wonders, do they get smaller next time? Will he be playing with springs and screws by the end of this? In no particular hurry, he ambles forward and reaches up, leaving only a few centimetres between him and a small pin.

He thinks about Gabriel. He slides the shape over to the outline of the gun.

The voice says ‘Time begun’.

And then it starts.

Jesse spends the first hour on this section of tasks. He assembles a variety of objects under timed conditions: each more intricate and difficult than the last. He’s asked to solve various problems involving numbers: some he understands, and some he doesn’t. The others he isn’t so sure of: inferring the next part of a pattern, mental rotation and spatial tasks. Hell, he thinks he has a headache by the end of it, unsure what the hell any of it has to do with Gabriel or his band of secret police, but Jesse knows better than to argue.

Because then it’s over. Head still spinning, things continue. The room is bare for maybe thirty seconds, and then a new hologram appears, in the shape of a man.
'We will now begin examining you on undercover operation. In this task, you will be shown a hologram of a foreign speaker and asked to interpret their meaning. When you are ready to begin, please touch the hologram.'

Owlishly, Jesse blinks. He doesn’t know the way even if he were to walk to the door. He has no recourse but to start.

The task itself is strange, but ultimately not terribly difficult. He relies on body language when he can, but finds himself shy to talk out loud to the empty room, even if he’s confident in his answers. In Jesse’s previous line of work, it pays to be able to read a man.

The hologram remains even after that task concludes.

‘You will know be examined on your inductive reasoning skills. You will be shown a series of short pieces of conversation, and then be asked to report everything you can infer about the speaker. Please start when you are ready by touching the hologram.’

It seems strange that all those months ago, when Gabriel came to his door and asked for his pills and stood in his room that Jesse was doing the same thing. That he could take one look at Gabriel and know a whole bunch. His intuition serves him.

After that, he’s shown a series of clips of conversations or merely footage of rooms and asked a similar thing. It’s harder with more people, and harder still when there is minimal conversation, but he makes do. Jesse supposes if he’s ever had on skill, it’s the ability to smell a weakness, and zero in on it. He’s got the whole world pegged, by now.

The counterintelligence tasks are stranger, still. The section opens with a game of bullet chess, followed then by a maze puzzle designed in such a way that he has to find an exit while block alternative paths. He’s no good at it, and feels ready to quit almost immediately. There’s an exercise next on rewiring different light switches and access panels to open doors and create diversions. He likes that far better.

The last task in that section is a hacking exercise. Jesse doesn’t understand it remotely. He doesn’t finish the first task they give him.

Resource management is maybe the most simple. It’s mainly questions about exposure --how to ration food, how to read maps. Optimising a hypothetical roster of people to ensure the success of a job. Things Jesse can liken to Deadlock days where he had a more active role: the fastest kids played lookout, the powerful men played bagman. That sort of thing.

He thinks he’s done, then. Forgets that there’s one more section. He’s halfway to the door, and starving, too, before he’s stopped.

‘The last section of the B.L.E.A.T. is physical aptitude with marksmanship. Your personnel medical file suggests exceptional circumstances, so portions of this section have been revised.’

Jesse wonders if it’s because of some intervention, then. Forgets, for a happy second, that they’ve likely amended their experiment so he doesn’t hurt himself, or the baby. The one that isn’t supposed to be there. He feels himself sour --exceptional circumstances, he thinks, bitterly, his hand dropping over his stomach. He never asked to be exceptional. Likes it better to be unexceptional, frankly. He sleeps better.
‘You have been opted out of the obstacle course and simulated combat tasks. We will now proceed with the standard marksmanship evaluation.’

Jesse looks around antsily.

‘In the corner of the room is case containing samples of some standard blackwatch equipment. These include a service pistol, a scoped bolt-action rifle, an assault rifle, a tactical shotgun and a ballistic knife. You may select the first weapon at your discretion’.

Hands itching, Jesse walks himself over to the corner of the room where the sleek black case lies, tall and wide. There’s no visible lock on it, so all he has to do is kneel and unlatch the thing. Lifting the lid reveals a soft foam that houses the series of weapons described, snugly and ergonomically fitting together in the case in complementary shapes.

He goes for the pistol immediately. Picks it up. Lets the cool weight settle in his hand before checking to see that it’s loaded. He finds the safety and clicks it off. Never was one for caution. He turns back around in time to see the back wall lit up with a hologram in the shape of a person, thereabouts. Blank and hollow.

‘You will be tested in two conditions. On stationery and then moving targets. Only your first six shots will be recorded. Agents are advised to ready themselves. You may fire when ready.’

Jesse lifts the gun the eye-level. It all feels so familiar. So easy and thrilling, even before the shot. He wonders if Gabriel will see this. If this will make him proud. He closes his left eye.

Bang.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

Anchored and unflinching, Jesse opens both of his eyes. Marked for his benefit, he can see where the shots have hit the hologram. All six of them, clustered to make a large and ungainly hole just off-centre of the target’s forehead. Not bad. Not bad at all.

‘Stationery pistol scores recorded. The target will now begin to move.’

The shape doesn’t fill out at all. Still blank and hollow. Jesse watches in dismay as the shape of the body begins to sprint, startlingly lifelike, from one side of the room to the other, and then back again. He tracks the motion with his eyes for a few seconds before he lifts the gun.

He fires.

He misses.

He misses?

The hologram continues to move. Jesse thinks about taking the next shot, but steel himself. Takes a breath in a aims for where the figure will be by the time the bullet reaches. Exhales slowly. Squeezes the trigger.

The shot connects. Too low, this time, grazing the hologram’s jaw. But it connects, anyway. Jesse counts it as a victory.
The same cannot be said for the other four shots.

It takes him maybe forty minutes or so. In the windowless room, it’s difficult to tell. But by the time Jesse is done with the frankly confusing but otherwise amusing ballistic knife on the moving hologram, he’s starving for lunch and could use the bathroom. He doesn’t know if he’s done well or not. If he’s done enough to stay.

Because then Athena is saying, ‘This concludes the physical aptitude with marksmanship section of the B.L.E.A.T. If you have any questions, at this point, you are advised to ask. Otherwise, you are free to leave’. Miss Amari is nowhere to be seen in the room. Not even when Jesse goes to the door and pokes his head out into the hall.

Not even when he goes back inside, at a loss.

He thinks upon what he’s been told. About asking questions. It’s not as if he doesn’t have many, and here, nobody is watching. He’s free to ask, isn’t he?

Feeling suddenly silly to be speaking in an empty room, Jesse clears his throat sheepishly. “So --so where can I eat?”

There is a second of silence. ‘Your nearest cafeteria can be located by taking the elevator at the end of the hall up to floor forty-five. From there, proceed left for fifteen yards. Today’s special is trout a la meuniere.’

He thinks to go to the door. But Jesse isn’t used to being alone here. He isn’t sure if he should wait. His isn’t sure of anything, anymore. ‘Should I be waitin’ for Miss Amari?’

There is another characteristic second of silence. It must be there to simulate human conversation. To put users at ease, Jesse guesses. He feels no more at ease for it, really, but it’s a nice touch all the same.

‘Captain Amari is indisposed and will not be joining you this afternoon. Would you like to leave a message for--’

“Naw,” Jesse shakes his head --for nobody’s benefit. “Naw --don’t call her down. I can manage.” but again, he feels hesitant to walk himself to the door. Maybe it’s because he knows all of the things he’s wanted to ask, but hasn’t had the nerve to, quite yet. Jesse’s never had a problem with guts before. He isn’t about to start. “Is --is Gabriel here? Reyes?”

A beat before the punchline. ‘Commander Reyes is onsite.’

“Can I see him?”

Jesse is sort of glad he isn’t talking to a person. So the anxiety on his face isn’t visible. Not the relief. God, he’s only been here a day, and he’s never wanted anything more in the world than to see a familiar face. To be comforted by Gabriel’s scent. Is it longing that has him this way? Or what Miss Amari said? Is he ‘nesting’: searching for the scent of an alpha (his alpha, part of him suggests) to ease him into the feeling of safety? Or at least safety enough to carry a child?

‘Affirmatory. Infirmary visiting hours are currently in operation. Proceed to South Wing: s/015/007.’
It’s only then that the force or suspense holding Jesse in the room seems to drop. He’s forgotten about his own hunger --forgotten about all else aside from the need to see Gabriel. He doesn’t care if he is nesting or not. If this is some illusion of pregnancy or some misguided sort of love. It’s not a perfect plan. But it’s the one he’s got.

“Thanks.” he hears himself say, then, to nobody in particular. Mulls the room number over in his head: s/015/007. He thinks about what Miss Amari told him last night: that Gabriel might already know everything. Jesse prays for his ignorance. Wonders if he can still fix this. He has no choice beyond going.

He places a nervous foot into the hallway and looks around the empty corridor. From there, he can see the elevator at the end of the hall.

It take more guts to step out into that hall than it does to climb any of the mountains out here. To face Gabriel like this: terrified as he is, disenfranchised and lost. It makes him more nervous than he thinks he’s been in the torrid and turbulent last day he’s been here.

But he does it, anyway.

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Ten floors across the way, in the north wing, Ana arrives late.

It’s not her meeting, in all fairness. Not her circus, not her monkeys, but here she is, breathless and unprepared, only half-briefed on the situation of civil unrest in England, and unfamiliar with the MI6 contacts there to meet with her. Still, it’s better late than never that she arrives, with a salute and an apology, doing her best to pull together the scene she’s been left with.

There’s hardly anything to work with: ten minutes notice from Jack, who, already late, had been uncharacteristically sloppy but to send her in his stead. No meetings minutes or notes prepared for her, either.

It’s unlike him to be late, to begin with. And especially about something so important.

There’s something deeply wrong here.

Ana knows it, too. She knew it the moment she left Jack to sleep last night, and the moment she got a security alert warning her that Gabriel’s boy was wandering off-site. She has felt it all morning --in the enhanced and peculiar disquiet of the place. Whispers tear through crowds: everybody knows about where Gabriel slept last night (the infirmary), even if they don’t quite know why. Jack has been radio silent all morning.

His only message to her is to drag her into his mess: to deal with foreign policy and the relevant litigation that should be expected if unauthorised Overwatch or Blackwatch activity should occur. That’s all she hears, and sitting there, at a total loss, looking a fool in front of the MI6 contacts and having left Jesse alone to have his mettle tested with only Athena as company, having been charged with the jurisdiction of this kid while her own word goes sorely overlooked and her free time dissolved, she should be furious.

Ana should be angry beyond reasonable belief. She has every right to be, and Christ, she should be.

She should be: but instead, she is afraid.
The fear in her comes the moment she gets Jack’s message: straight to her personal, unformatted and strange: ‘needed, North Wing, n/40/010, 11am.’

It comes in at ten past the hour and her worry has begin to set in by then --only to blossom when there’s no sight of him in the room. She replies in the hopes of ascertaining his whereabouts, hoping she’ll only be tasked with delaying the meeting, but then there is no further reply. Nothing but silence. Jack never arrives.

The MI6 contacts leave having said their piece, dissatisfied by how Overwatch have operated on the basis of the meeting, with tight goodbyes to Ana who is by now practically tapping her heel with impatience to get away. With the fear: that started from a jealousy that has bloomed to a doubt and now to a hideous suspicion that lies in the bottom of her stomach as cold and sharp as the tang of blood in water.

She feels sick to wonder about it. She departs for his office immediately.

It’s in the south part of the building, ten floors above, and the journey is agonising. The corridors are busy with agents and contacts and assets who mill about, in her way, blithely unaware of the horror of the last two days (or even weeks), having heard only rumours, distant and faraway tales of misery that isn’t their own.

The door is closed when she approaches. Locked, when she tries it. Empty: when she opens a slide on the wall of the door outside and tries to find Jack’s last active whereabouts.

His room. His personal quarters. It’s worse than she thought.

Becoming truly faint with worry, now, she contacts him again, in some futile attempt at finding comfort, heading over almost immediately. Her gut is tight and coiled all the while, sparing no thought for Jesse or Gabriel or anything else. She sees the world these days as if through a pinhole gap in a piece of paper. There’s only ever enough room to see Jack; he’s the only thing she can look at.

Maybe that’s why, in the middle of the day, and her precious free time, she’s sick with nerves outside of a private door --his door, afraid to try the handle and go inside, but irrevocably bound by her duty to do so.

She tries the door. Knocks in three serious raps, and calls out, for good measure. “Jack?”

Maybe he’s tired. She tries to bargain with the situation before her. Convinced herself to some better world: after the day he had yesterday, maybe he’s just sleeping. Or recovering. Or mourning. Maybe everything is fine.

The silence indicates to the contrary.

Ana is emboldened enough to flinch and try the handle. There’s a click that trickles down the halfway point of the silence, and there’s give. In some easy motion, the handle goes all the way down. No lock interrupts the motion, and Ana knows how easy it would be to push forward, even with minimal force, and step inside.

She hesitates. Calls out, again, for better effect. “Jack?”
But there’s nothing once more, and each second is harder than the last. So she pushes on the door with the side of her arm, keeping the handle sharply down, and goes to step inside. The doors are weighted automatically. She’s barely inside, adjusting to the stark darkness of the room when the door closes behind her --startling her.

The room is how she remembers it: only, in disrepair.

It looks like somebody has ransacked the place. The night stand on the left side of the bed has been toppled over completely: its contents scattered about the floor. The dresser has been rifled through, too, drawers belching miscellaneous fabrics, clothes strewn about everywhere. She can hardly see it all through the dim of the room. Daylight has been decidedly shut out, the blackout curtains doing their best to defend against Zurich’s noon.

The air is dense and stale. Cigarettes, she realises, belatedly, taking a few steps further into the room. She can see an empty lowball glass on the still-intact nightstand on the right-hand side of the bed that’s been used as an improvised ashtray, maybe a quarter-full. The bed itself is another matter entirely: gaudy poppy blooming on the cotton of the pillowcases in small circles, the duvet cast mostly onto the floor. Unmade.

It’s not like Jack to leave a bed unmade.

There’s still no sign of him, but the door to the ensuite is cracked open. It leaves her with some hope, and she turns to cross the room towards it when something underheel crunches and startles her. Glass, she realises, taking a step backwards to examine what it is she’s no doubt damaged.

On it’s back, buried into the carpet, she picks up a photograph, still in it’s frame. The glass already looks to have been broken: her intrusion not the cause but merely an extension. When she turns it around in her hands, a jagged piece of the glass cuts her on the side of the finger absently, but not enough that she moves away. For, then she’s looking at a picture she recognises: if only because she’s in it.

They all are: the three of them. Some posed thing, taken days after the crisis was over in the biggest sense. Strange days, those were. The unreality of existing hit them all, she remembers. Hadn’t the world ended? Had they lived? Pictures were taken as if just to prove it: to remember things in the entire. Jack is the only one smiling.

Young, then, though. Unbeknownst of the worst --or even the best. His neck is bare in the picture. Unmarked. That didn’t last, either.

Her cut finger swipes over the picture, absently, leaving a slight smear of blood over Gabriel’s face, before she sets it down somewhere, almost reverently, on the dresser by the bed. Jack probably doesn’t want to see it. Jack probably doesn’t want to see her: but then, none of them really get what they want, do they?

Then she’s closing in on the bathroom door, finding it through the smoky air. Moving forward slowly and just feeling the surface of it. Frightened, initially, by what she has found in his room to advance much further.

But whatever has driven Jack to this shouldn’t be something he has to shoulder alone.

“Jack?” She tries on last time, softly. Gently as she can, moving the door fully to, now.
It’s even darker inside. But she sees him, all the same. And god, she wishes she hadn’t.

There, in the bath --she can make out the shape of his head as it is, at rest, leaning back and to the right. Just over the lip of the basin. From where she remains, frozen in the door, she can see an empty bottle on it’s side by one of the tub’s clawfeet, and another remaining upright but mostly finished.

The air is even more dense in here. Cigarettes. The faint, sour sort of tang of rye and bile. She can hardly make out the fresh sharpness of first frost and pine in the air beneath it all.

Jack’s form doesn’t move. Asleep. Of all places, asleep, here. His comm is visible in the soapcatch as her eyes adjust to the light. Discarded. Forgotten: as he is. Ana can’t help but think of the years during the crisis, where Jack learned to sleep lightly, flinching into alertness at the slightest noise or sensation. Ready.

Now? She thinks she could cross the room and shake him and he’d hardly stir. Could come up behind him and slit his throat. God knows he’s in enough pain that there’s little chance he would notice.

So she doesn’t do anything but snap the light on. Hoping a little illumination will be enough to rouse him. He flinches, to her hopes, eyes wrinkling, as if fussing under suddenly blood-bright sockets. But they don’t open. He turns himself slightly more onto his side and Ana stares at the shape of his skull hopelessly because she knows she’ll have to go over there, and she’ll have to be close to him, and she’ll have to put her hands on him.

They feel cold at her sides. It would be easier to keep this distance.

But then she’s on him --a hand on his shoulder, careful not to touch the parts of his front stuck with drying vomit, shaking gently but firmly to wake him. “Jack.” She says again, the only word she thinks she knows in this language sometimes. Her tongue curls back in her mouth as if caught on a barbed wire snare: jack-jack-jack-jack. “Jack.”

He makes a noise of complaint. He furrows his brow miserably, shying from the light once more. It’s rare he looks this tired, even with his eyes still shut, but Ana can see the dark and heavy shadow surrounding the veiled blue. Jack’s mouth opens and shuts a little and he grimaces like his mouth is ashen. His head turns to locate the source of his disruption, and it’s only then that his eyes open.

Bloodshot. Slanderous and red, hazy as one’s reflection in a puddle. There’s not a bit of relief in them to see Ana. Not much of anything, really, beyond pain.

Jack grimaces again. His body shifts inwards towards the bath as if trying to protect himself.

Ana’s hand doesn’t leave him. She shakes again when his eyes look like they’re going to close, only earning herself a groan of despair in the process. He looks back at her as if offended. Then around, with a sudden burst of energy, as if recalling some awful event. “What --what time is it?”

Ana humours him, at least. “Gone midday.”

He’s trembling, and yet still puts a hand on the edge of the tub like he’s ready to climb out and face the day. Is his work ever done? Is he that ready and content to play at atlas? “The briefing--”

“I took care of MI6.” She says, to cut him off. Comes to rest on the edge of the bath next to him.
Would it be more intimate if he had passed out in a bed? Not by much, if the sour tinge of alcohol is anything to go by, nor the foul must of cigarettes. There is nothing intimate about aftermath. Not even in the way Jack looks momentarily relieved, and nods to hear, blearily. She has to ask. “What happened?”

He shifts in the tub again. His bones jostle. Ana vaguely remembers somebody who used to look vibrant and vital, but he’s nowhere to be seen in the sullen and melancholic whisper from Jack. “You know what happened.” Is all he can seem to manage. His voice is sullied and cracked.

Ana hardly knows what to say. Is this her fault, she wonders? Shouldn’t she have seen this coming? She recalls Jack paper-thin and stuck with wreath as white as death: was it two or three weeks ago that he lost his child? It’s all come in one fell swoop for him: the mess of Deadlock with it, and Gabriel, too.

Christ, Gabriel. She never should have brought the little deadlock omega here.

She should have known. Should have --should have protected him, somehow, so that it never came to this. Jack, sitting up, now, violently hungover, wounds made of Gabriel’s fear still on his hands and face, sick as a dog and as pathetic as one.

Lucid enough to hang his head and look at her, uselessly. The more consciousness seems to come back to him, the more he seems to realise the situation he’s in. Then a trembling hand is coming up to cover the mark on his neck, and Jack’s eyes are suddenly glistening.

Maybe it all only hits him now. The cumulation of it all has finally gotten to him, catching him like the undertow of a dark, swelling wave and pulling him under. Because he has held in in for so long, and Ana watches as he tries to. Even now --Jesus, even now, his jaw sets tight like he’s trying to fight the need to cry. But last night was his last straw, she knows, and there is nothing left in him to stop the sob that breaks.

Rips through him like a bolt of thunder. Makes a noise like choking. The hand Jack has over his marked neck curls and his nails bite into his skin like he wishes he could claw Gabriel off of his body and out of his system.

“Jack,” Ana hears herself say again, easy as a sigh, instinctively. She drops to her knees at the side of the bath if only to be able to see his face. Feels with her hands to find the edges. “Oh, Jack.”

But he doesn’t cease a bit, even when she tilts his chin up. He only tries to turn his face away like he’s ashamed to be seen like this. He never asked her to come. Never asked for anything --but did he ever have to, with her? She knows without a word to let him turn his face away. She leans over the lip of the tub instead. She embraces him.

Jack trembles in her arms. But he doesn’t fight. For once; perhaps there is nothing left.

Ana doesn’t know who long she stays there with him. The duration of it is meaningless: they are the only people on earth in those moments. Jack’s body shakes. He tries to compose himself so many times but never quite gets there, wrenched by these childish, knifelike sobs that work themselves between these sudden stabs of breath inwards. He clings to her so tightly. Like he’s afraid even she will be taken from him.

His form is comforting and familiar to her. She traces long, soothing strokes down the plane of his back and listens to his breathing. Keeps her face pressed into his shoulder, her mouth aching in the
shape of intimacy but never daring to do anything about it. Now is not the time.

Outside of this, Ana knows, the world continues to turn. She should get back to her duties: shuffling the strike team roster for interventions in New Guinea, seeing to Fareeha, getting back to the deadlock child and dealing with everything Gabriel has been relieved and robbed of in his suspension. But, in this moment, nothing seems fathomable beyond Jack. Beyond how tightly he holds her.

Eventually, though, he seems to wear himself out enough to settle. Can only cough out angry sighs, worse than when she found him, leaning heavy against her like he lacks the strength to function.

It’s only then Ana thinks she should actually do something. Move him. Make some comfortable space for Jack’s pain. “Alright,” She hears herself say, quietly. “Come on.”

Mercifully, he is pliant enough to move himself at her motion, jerking himself limply from the tub as best he can, with her help, staggering back towards the bed. The room is in unusual disarray. They do their best to avoid the mess underfoot, and the broken glass. If Jack notices the picture in the frame Ana put back up, he doesn’t mention it.

He does seem to try for the dresser, though, pulling away from her to go to a drawer.


He resists her. It’s so characteristic, as he feels over a shirt, sniffing uselessly. “I need to--”

“To rest.” She snatches it from him, not unkindly, but in a sharp enough gesture to quell the idea before it can root itself much. The shirt is discarded in lieu of pulling him, gently as she can go, toward the bed, not satisfied until he is at least sitting. “And if you won’t do that, then you can at least stay here and answer my emails for me.”

Jack looks up at her from where he’s sat. Still trembling, his face still white and ruined with drying tears. His expression is thoughtful in that way she doesn't trust, like he’s looking for an escape route. So she pulls a slide up, and navigates to her inbox, leaving it there, in the air, before him.


She has enough to do without taking on his work, too. Enough without taking on Gabriel’s, but what then? One look at Jack, and she knows that if he asked for her eyes right now, she’d crawl to fetch a scalpel. She would go to the earth’s end for him. He doesn’t even need to ask.


And that’s all she needs to hear.

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Somewhere in the West Wing, Gabe is dreaming of straw dogs.

His sleeping thoughts are abstract and unfathomable. Straw dogs. Red rabbits. Jack, standing in the nurse’s office of their SEP days with his back to Gabriel, reading the snellen eye chart on the wall. The clock on the wall ticks the time by sharply, the sound somehow abrasive. Gabe can hear it
between chews.

Gabe dreams he is eating an apple.

Then Jack is turning around. Younger, here to his mind, ten years younger. His jaw is less set and his brow is less furrowed. Jack’s lips are red. Red as the apple. Like blood. There is no sign of injury, though. No cracks on his face worse than a smile.

He leans up and opens his pretty mouth. Moves his hand to fix on Gabe’ wrist --the one holding the apple, pulling it down towards him. His teeth fix onto the rouge skin of the fruit. His eyes are staring vacantly into Gabe’s as Jack takes the bite. A single bite.

Gabe wakes up sweating.

With a figure above him --the figure of a boy.

Jesse is holding his wrist, sweetly, with horror in his eyes.


And Gabe has no answer.
Chapter Notes

this was a super long time coming, i know! but it's done, at last. this was quite literally
made possible by Jack (the best) and all of the beautiful people i hear from. not kidding.
feedback sustains me and creates energy.

some people noted on the last chapter, but i am gonna say it: yes, ana fucking adores
jack to pieces. so a nice thought exercise might be to look back on her early interactions
with gabe in a new light. is she trying to bust his balls for the sake of it, or trying to
protect somebody/something?

It’s a little known fact that the liver converts codeine into morphine.

That, all those years ago, that numbness and painless delirium Gabe had been so infatuated with
wasn’t even the drug he was taking. He was only seeking some happy accident: some byproduct. He
knows this, because after the agony of withdrawal, of getting ‘clean’ (though nothing about it felt
clean: not the night sweats or the shakes) --after all of that, he ended up going through medical after
bad intel caused a mission to take a turn.

They’d been sedating him on the floor of transport, trying to stitch up and glue together the worst of
it. It had all been very frantic. Nobody looked through his records. Nobody there knew.

But the moment that first rush came: of soft, but hot, dizzy sweetness came, Gabe was taken back to
all those years ago. Dragged backwards through time in some state of euphoria. Pain became
secondary and distant. Everything dead. His clarity remained, but became singular only to himself.

The drug had barely reached his system, and he knew.

Just like he knows, now, waking suddenly and dizzily to what must surely be some dreamed
apparition of Jesse; he knows.

Somebody didn’t bother to read his case history.

Cotton-mouthed and horrified, he focuses as best he can on the milky haze of the room around him.
Somebody should be here to stop this --should have been here to prevent his instant seduction to the
instant, comfortable numb of it. God, already, he can feel his thoughts slipping through his fingers.
Can feel the mechanical and obvious click that he’s been chasing ever since they took his pills away.

The benzos, the ludes --they were a shade of this. A pale imitation.

Jesse is still standing there, at his bedside. Not Jack. Not Jack despite the confusing blue the kid is
dressed in. Despite the tenderness of the touch. God, for a second, Gabe forgets that he’s lost Jack --
that he lost at all, and he’s confused right up until that scent of creosote and arid air and sarsaparilla
reaches him.

Richer, now. Sweeter as if in season.
It’s Jesse there. The only other vice he thinks he has. Somebody should have been here to stop this, too.

But nobody is. Morphine tingles in his system. Jesse doesn’t let go of his wrist. Keeps a hold of it as he comes to sit down, at Gabe’s side. He’s said something, too --there were words spoken, but Gabe can’t be sure what they were, or if they were important. He wishes he could grasp the sensation of the moment in any amount of clarity, but there’s none to be found.

Jesse’s image is dreamlike and impressionistic. Sat, now. Smiling faintly, as if relieved.

“Y’with me?” Gabe hears him say. Isn’t focused enough to see the kid’s mouth move. “Gabriel?”

There’s distant pain. Gabe doesn’t feel it but he knows it’s there. The ache across his face and the shatter of his nose when he lets out some noise as if just to confirm he’s there, and that he hasn’t become a vapour. Jesse’s touch is a strange sort of anchor --achingly tender in its wake, like the kid wants to do more. To puts his arms around Gabriel, but isn’t quite bold enough to.

Gabe’s thoughts are scattered --a mess. Something is wrong about this, and he knows it, but can neither identify or say what. That’s fine. Jesse leans heavy on his arm --the one not cast and slung close to his body, and does the talking.

“Not sure I like it this way ‘round.” The kid murmurs, quietly. Almost fearfully. “Kinda liked it better when I was the one in the bed, y’know?”

Gabe recalls those early days in some haze of spring. The bite mark high on Jesse’s thigh. The blood, there. How he still looked so serene, with his feet all tangled in the sheets. Christ, this is probably the most clothes he’s seen Jesse ever wear outside of a prison jumpsuit.

The kid sits in navy. Overwatch issue. Whoever’s keeping to him probably doesn’t have access or interest enough to give the kid the right uniform.

The colour alone is enough that Gabe’s thoughts can’t help but wind themselves back to Jack. Never could keep his fingers off a scab. Never can help himself but to recall what he’d been dreaming: the bright boy in SEP-grey with this look in his eyes of permanent challenge, and how it sits side-by-side with his last recollection of Jack. His face bright with blood and tears. How he’d buried it in Ana’s shoulder as the last of his resolve gave way.

Ignorant to it all, Jesse sits in blue, and strokes up Gabe’s wrist, and if he closes his eyes just-so, and lets the click in his head soften his vision, Gabe can kid himself that it’s Jack here, with him. That yesterday never came.

He should say something --shouldn’t let Jesse keep hanging on like this. He turns his head, and on a tiny, dry voice, he murmurs, “Y-you should--” He swallows, “--go.”

Jesse seems to hear him. Tilts his head softly, his fox-like features calm with concern. “Got nowhere better t’be.” He says, almost sweetly. “Might as well stay an’ cause all kinds a’ trouble.”

Gabe wants to protest better than a breathless, “Jesse--..” Wants to say something about Jack. About the mess they’re both in whether the kid knows it or not. About what he’s dragged Gabe into with his little honesty bid, but nothing else comes quickly enough. All he can do is pull his wrist away.
It’s ultimately meaningless, because then Jesse’s leaning forward and quirking a cautious smile. “Gabriel.” He mirrors, quietly. Lets it stay there in the air. Some great act of defiance. Not his first, but maybe his most successful. True to his word, Jesse doesn’t go to stand, or to leave. Moves closer to the bed and leans over it, close as he seems to dare.

His mouth quirks like he wants to say something. But the intention is abandoned when Gabe cuts him off. Tired of dwelling on it silently.

“You’re pregnant.” Tact blunted, it comes out suddenly. Quietly, but unmistakable in its diction. There would be accusation, there, if Gabe were up for it. But he isn’t. He can only whisper, hoping it hears Jesse.

The kid does him the kindness at least of dipping his head. Looking away in guilt, as if caught out. His mouth makes the word ‘fuck’. How long did he intend to hide it? Was he saving the news for some special occasion or scenario where they were more to each other than a fleeting mistake?

Maybe Jesse isn’t like Jack: who would pretend not to hear. Who would have his charges read out all the clearer before admitting to anything. A different beast, in that aspect: or maybe just older, and wiser.

It seems to take an age for the kid’s head to lift, and when it does Jesse looks none the better for Gabe’s words: his face white, his mouth open in indecision, still attempting to quirk at a smile. Like he wants to believe he could talk himself out of this one (or at the very least, try).

“Guess y’heard.” Jesse says, eventually. Couldn’t handle the napalm quiet any more. To break it is the albatross around his neck: nobody else can step in to explain for him, or make things better. Maybe that’s why he sounds so damn small, and terrified. Feigning confidence with a shaky laugh that sheds a trembling light on his indignities. “Was sorta hopin’ you, uh --that y’might not a’ heard yet.”

Jesse swallows. He’s started to lean back. To physically pull away. Gabe reaches the kid’s wrist easily to anchor him there. It startles Jesse, but he stays. Kid’s never been very good at escape plans. The tattoo higher up on his arm speaks of that much, blurry to Gabe’s eyes as Jesse tests the hold of his grip in a half-aborted motion of pulling away.

“I-I woke you, anyhow.” Jesse tells him, tightly. “Y’should save your strength.” It’s an old adage, paired with the muted urgency of terror: like Jesse’s really afraid of Gabriel, and what he might do. Like he’s no different to any of Jesse’s other keepers: with the same casual cruelty of Miss Marie or the guised kindness of Johnny Ringo.

To the credit of Jesse’s fear, Gabe doesn’t let him go. He’s still got one good hand and a grip to show for it. He squeezes, as a warning. The kid stills.

“Did you know?” He manages to ask. Thinks back to their prison visits, Jesse’s form obscured by orange --the scent of him unusual and sharp. Jesus, even all the way back to Jesse’s form all limp and cooling on that surly bathroom floor. He had never for a second thought --never even entertained the notion.

(Because then there was Jack --suddenly less closed to him. Brilliant with life. Happy, then, for the first time in years.)

Clearly he’s alone in that: Jesse isn’t much good at hiding guilt as he stares off, violent in his
discomfort, eyeing the door and the corner of the room above it like if he thinks hard enough he can escape. “I don’t know.” he says, eventually, uselessly, with a decorative little shrug.

Gabe squeezes on his arm, and the kid bristles, “I didn’t!” He barks out, sharply, losing all of his momentum when he realizes that he won’t be let free so easily. Jesse is in arrears, here, and there’ll be no chance of his freedom, nor benefit to siding with Gabriel if they don’t get clear with each other. So Jesse heaves a sighing breath and murmurs, “I wasn’t --I wasn’t sure, awright?”

His voice is a whisper in the reeds. Suddenly tragic.

“I thought maybe I was jus’--” Jesse closes his eyes mournfully. “Then I missed m’heat, I figured maybe I was jus’ --jus’ sick. Or --or tired.” he sighs again. Even through it all he can never quite bring himself to gaze back to Gabe. As if he’s trying to keep himself from being too fully known. “I’d --I’d lost Johnny. I figured I was gonna spend the rest a’ my days there in lockup.” he swallows. “Thought maybe my insides were all mixed up.”

Dream-feverish, dry in the mouth, Gabe looks at the kid, tiredly --resentfully. He doesn’t even need to say anything: the gaze is enough to scare more words out of Jesse, who’s turning into him, now, as if looking for an ally.

“Don’t look at me like that.” The kid hisses, miserably.

Gabe can hardly fathom how his face is. “Like what?” Hasn’t he had this conversation before? Hasn’t Jack asked him this? It’s not the same look, though. The opposite, if anything. Not fearful longing, or wondering if he never ends up where he wants to be.

But wondering how he found himself here to begin with.

Jesse bristles at it. His shoulders are high and tight, his voice defensive with anger. “Like you’re angry at me.” He says, stuntedly, having gone back to looking away. “Like this is my fault.”

Gabe thinks back to every time the kid used to lean back on his hands and part his thighs. The offer was always there --to take Jesse, if he wanted to. Does that make it Jesse’s fault, though? Is he absolved by how Gabe found him: lost in the dustbowl at the other edge of the earth, some child mixed in with a terrible crowd; nothing but the product of bad luck?

His silence is seen as an indictment. It breaks the kid’s steely little resolve and he’s looking back to Gabe angrily like his indignation can save him, here.

(He only thinks that because he didn’t see Jack last night.)

Exasperated then --maybe not so angry as Gabe first thought, Jesse finally gets his wrist free to cross his arms over chest, if only to create a physical barrier between them. Gone is the innocence of spring and the kid’s open, easy nature. “Jesus Christ, Gabriel.” He says, all strung out and wounded. “Say somethin’, wouldja?!!”

Gabe’s dark eyes roll in their purple sockets towards Jesse. Gravity is slowly coming back to him. He feels lucid and present enough to be distantly angry. The loss, mainly, clouds his sense of thought. That’s what his blame is second to. That’s why he continues to look at Jesse with a cold and needling gaze. Why he opens his mouth and grinds out, “You said enough for the both of us.”

That has Jesse’s attention. His frustration suddenly gone in the face of something else: something
worse. His face turns white as a sheet, and his mouth closes where it was open with some useless, automatic retort. The kid swallows. His voice is a shy and stuttering thing when it comes out.

“What?” It’s all Gabe has to do is hold that gaze. To see the kid’s horror, and it’s enough to squeeze something else out of Jesse. “I-I never told anybody about --about us--”

Jack’s face occurs to him again --silver and illuminated through tears. Looking older and unfamiliar, a fragile little stranger made of glass with this sharp, desperate voice, hissing to him ‘and to have to hear about it like this? From Ana?’ Nobody guessed that much. By implication or omission, the truth left Jesse’s mouth somehow. It must have.

Gabe coughs out in a hard voice. “Jesse.”

The spark of panic ignites in the kid again, turning back towards Gabe to make his little appeal, his usually bright eyes nervous, the lustre and seduction of his form dulled, as if bleached by chlorine water. “I --I didn’t.”

But there’s enough panic there, in his face: enough guilt that Gabe knows beyond what Jack said, and what Ana must have said. Kid always was too trusting. Too young. Yet here? Now? It garners him no mercy. Instead, Gabe has no other recourse but to ask, in a cold but by no means uncertain voice. “Jesse.” He grinds out, again. “What did you say?”

The kid looks away from him again.”Nothin’.” He murmurs. Shuffles in his seat like he wants to make for the door. This level of scrutiny --of Gabe’s anger, is a form and intensity the likes of which Jesse has never been subject to before. He looks bruised by it. Terrified --as if his own transgression will have Gabe erase him or deny him love. It isn’t even clear which would be worse to the boy. “Nothin’, I --I swear.”

Gabe’s lax hand makes a fist in the bedsheets covering him, passive in his own frustration, but enough that Jesse looks down at the motion helplessly. “All i said was that --was that you’d be angry at me.” Jesse mumbles. The hesitance doesn’t suit him. It feels wrong, somehow, as it sits above the faint, slanderous and of creosote and dust. “I thought maybe ---maybe you’d send me back, if you knew... For not--“ Jesse looks back at him, then, bright with tight anticipation. “For not bein’ more careful.”

Gabe can hardly know what to say. Doesn’t know where the extent of his injuries and loss stop and meet with the shock of the kid, as he is, vital with growing life in all of the same ways Jack should have been (should still be): with colour high in his cheeks, a sweetness to his scent. This softness that remains despite how fraught with fear the boy looks, as if convinced of the prospect that Gabe has dug him out of one hole only to put him back into it.

The silence seems to act as a force upon that same fear once more: Jesse’s mouth closes in a firm line and he sounds different, then --resolute, to speak. “Y’can’t send me back. I didn’t say anythin’ about what we did.” That defense turns external, and the kid looks around the room as if for someone to blame. “They must’a --must’a already known--”

“So you told them?” Gabe hears himself cut in. He finally feels grounded, but not in a clarity sense so much as coldness at his spine and a pressure in his chest like somebody is parking their car on his chest. That could be the broken ribs, or the words Jesse is saying. He can’t help himself. “I couldn’t toast a piece of fucking bread with the heat they had on you!” He tries to sit himself up better. To fully look the kid in the eyes and hold him accountable --that Jack is gone and maybe he’d still be here were it not for Jesse. “They had nothing! Not even a damn suspicion, and now-- jesus, what kind of a hooker isn’t on preventatives?!”
Then Jesse’s mouth tightens, and he looks just like he did the first time Gabe laid a hand on him -- when Gabe warned him not to talk about Jack, and the kid had froze up so damn quick it had looked as if he’d never smiled in his whole life. There’s no fear, this time, though. Just a permeating frost that doesn’t suit the intrinsic warmth of Jesse at all.

Of course Jesse isn’t afraid. Gabe’s the one in the bed, after all.

Helpless as he lies there, really, to watch Jesse swallow and turn his face away, looking so suddenly unreadable and unreachable. Unfamiliar, but known. “If you didn’t want nobody findin’ out you’d fucked me,” Jesse says, in a new voice: shaking with latent and furious energy, but tempered into tight and small words. “Then you shouldn’t a’ fucked me.”

It harkens back to one of the very first things the kid had said to him, in the dim of the ‘No Vac’ sign, swaddled in plaid, legs laid bare as he declared, ‘People always wanna start moralisin’ after things are done, an’ not before.’, and it’s only then that Gabe realises that the men he had so happily ended: the villains in Jesse’s story: Johnny Ringo, Miss Marie, every alpha with their dirty little hands on the boy at the high side --they are the same as him.

Too late a realisation, though, for then Jesse’s standing up. Gabe wouldn’t be able to reach him if he tried: and doesn’t manage to. The kid stands, fully, taller than Gabe recalls, and turns towards the door. Taking one step, and then two, and his summer-sweet scent of creosote and sarsaparilla is fading to Gabe’s every sense, abducted by the Zurich mountain wind. There is no last look or other word. Everything in the kid’s posture is so final and awful that Gabe finds himself on hands and knees as if crawling through original sin again just to call out, weakly, “Jesse.”

The kid stops. The door is right in front of him, but still, he pauses. The word has at least reached him, but he doesn’t turn around, and for a brief second, half-sitting and mildly agonised, Gabe might think the kid doesn’t care at all.

But then he registers the tense drop and slight shake to Jesse’s shoulders and only realises the kid might be on the verge of furious and angry tears.

Eventually, Jesse lets out some shaky breath and whispers, “I ain’t a hooker anymore, Gabriel.” He murmurs, all ragged with vitriol. “I’m a -- a ‘pro-visional agent’, now.” There’s some awful noise that might be an attempt at a laugh, but comes out more as a sniff. “Thought you’d be --jesus, I dunno, proud a’ me, after all that schtick y’gave me about doin’ somethin’ else--” “Jesse.” Gabe repeats himself. Maybe it’s the only word he’s got the rights left to use. Or maybe he just doesn’t know what else to say, fraught like this, leaning forward on his better arm and feeling the distant heat blooming across his chest that will tighten to pain when the morphine leaves him. The name gets the kid’s attention. It’s at least something, but not enough to keep him here. And they aren’t nearly done talking yet.

Gabe feels something in him soften. Is it fear, or love, when he opens his mouth and sighs to say, “Of course I’m proud of you.”

Because it’s true, regardless of base emotion. He is proud to see Jesse here, with colour in his face -- with vitality, and warm clothes, far away from the dustbowl they would have found his dead and naked body in. At the very least, he’s proud, and Jesse has to know that.

The kid makes some noise to hear it. Maybe an intake of breath, or something, and then he’s turning back slightly, only very slightly, with his head dipped low so Gabe can’t see a bit of his face from where his hair hangs. “But you’re ashamed a’ me, too.” His head lifts a little, chin jutted out slightly
in defiance, eyes all shiny but contained, somehow. “At least lie consistently, Gabriel.”

Gabe wonders if anybody has told Jesse that before --that they were proud of him. If it was ever a lover or a mother or somebody who meant in earnest, and not some pimp or gunrunner who was whispering it lewdly to encourage the kid to take a cock deeper or to work through pain. Probably not, and he knows it. God, even here and now, Jesse has grounds not to believe it. He can’t blame the kid for that. But the least he can do is explain himself.

“I’m not ashamed of you, kid.” He says, tersely. “But --Christ, you weren’t supposed to get pregnant.” It still sounds cruel, a little, but that’s how the matter lies. There’s an awful lot of cruelty in it: in all that’s happened to Jack, and to Jesse. In all that Gabriel has done and failed to do to them. Swallowing, he shakes his head. “I’m --I am glad you’re here, Jesse. I am. But I don’t know what to do.”

The admission of loss, or failure: the thing Gabe fears most of all, seems to grant him grace this once. He’s always been terrified to let things die. Could never stomach surrender when for so long, during the crisis, he believed that the world was hanging on his vigilance and paranoia. Would never be able to draw a line in the sand with Jack. His mouth can hardly get itself around the words, and the notion, of helplessness. Of seeking counsel: any.

But by some miracle of cosmic largesse --one that never came before, the admission is enough to have the kid turn back towards him with a helpless, watery little smile of his own.

Jesse shrugs, looking small in his uncertainty. He sniffs. “Ain’t like I know, either.”

He’s turned fully back towards where Gabe is twisted to sit up. Where the sheets have come away, what’s keeping him in one piece is more visible: the cast on one arm, a series of bandages compressing his chest among some things --the nose splint having been obvious regardless. Older bandages sit beneath from grenade shrapnel. The worst of the injuries aren’t visible: or physical.

Gabe can track the kid’s gaze and see that he’s looking, fearfully but with warmth, too. It’s what he tries to focus on, instead of the way the kid’s wrist is sort of pressed against his stomach, highlighting a distinct and unfamiliar shape. Some distinct but miniscule curve that would have no other explanation, given how little fat there is on any other part of the kid. He’s useless but to think back to better days, then, even as he pointedly doesn’t look: not just of Jack those few weeks ago, but in the hazy and gravity-less year after the crisis, when Jack’s mark was new and he’d sit with Fareeha, in his lap and Gabe thought, all the while, all those years ago, that maybe he was looking into the future.

Nostalgia was never a very good look for him. It won’t serve him, now, and neither will it Jesse, so he leans himself back, tiredly, and looks back to the seat Jesse had taken before, by the bed, where his hoodie is strewn over the back.

“I’m not angry at you.” He says --feels the need to say it, because he thinks he is angry with Jesse, privately. “We just --we need to figure this out.”

The kid is smarter than he looks --or has learned to be fearful in his compliance. Says a lot about the men in Jesse’s life that he ambles back over to sit like he’s ready to forgive so soon. He takes his time, though, drawing one knee up so that his foot is on the chair and he’s leaning over it, almost childishly, as the other pulls the hoodie into his lap. His chin is half-buried in it. Above the dark fabric and through his hair, Gabe can see his eyes.

Gabe doesn’t mind. This will probably go easier if he does the talking, even if it’s a tired and powerless voice but to sigh, and ask, “How did this happen?” He tries not to sound too disappointed. Tries to keep Jesse here, with those eyes on him.

It seems to work. Jesse doesn’t reel away or fight it. Just looks off to the side all morose. “I don’t know.” He murmurs. “I mean --we, uh --you fu--”

“Not that.” Gabe says. Too raw from expressing his failure aloud to hear of his own sins, but unable to confess to Jesse, the kid with stars in his eyes, how deep his shame and regret goes, despite it all. “What I’m asking is --I can’t have been your only client that day.”

He says that part slowly, and carefully, deliberately skirting the real question: ‘I can’t have got you pregnant’.

Which is why his heart sinks to his feet instantly when Jesse’s head shakes, slightly, and he frowns like he’s confused. Like Gabe is wrong. “You, uh--” The kid dips his head, pained. “Y’sort of were.” The kid at least has the grace to scratch the nape of his neck and look away, though it takes his words no easier. “It was my birthday. I wasn’t takin’ that sort a’ business.”

Gabe wishes he hadn’t taken a swig or bite or dose of anything that night. Wishes he could remember in better detail --convinced that this cannot all be by his hand. “But --but you said Johnny Ringo’d come by. I saw him leaving.”

The kid lets out a breath and smiles, faintly, despite himself. “Johnny--...” The kid whispers like just the name on his lips is enough to make him feel better. “Johnny weren’t a client.”

Impatient, Gabe’s tone clips at the edges, “But you fucked him before I came by. You told me you did.”

The kid shrugs a shoulder. Nods. “Yeah.” he says, limply. “After he bought over the stock.” Then Jesse’s chin lifts and he looks up all sharp and wise. “An’ for your information, he couldn’t bring over no preventatives because all the supply lines were shut.”

(But the kid still fucked him. Imagine that. Imagine Gabe hadn’t come over. That it was just Johnny. That Jesse was still out there --but like this. Broke and afraid and pregnant. Gabe doesn’t know what to picture: wire hangers, long needles in swollen bellies, or a dusty child clinging to its parents hand at the side of orange asphalt, holding a cardboard sign neither of them can read.

Maybe it’s a deeper irony that Gabe was the one forcing the pressure on the supply lines. If he’d never have come, or approached Deadlock the slightest bit differently, Jesse wouldn’t be pregnant. But Jesse also wouldn’t be here --wouldn’t be dressed, wouldn’t be safe.

(After all: no good deed goes unpunished.)

The kid dips his head again into the hoodie and sighs. The hand scratching his neck has migrated to the side, and his palm is flat where a mark would be. Like, on some level, he expects or craves to feel one there, and not a soft and unmarred expanse of skin instead.

“Who else?” Gabe hates to break his little reverie, but must. Has to get to the bottom of this ugliness for all their sakes.
The question doesn’t seem to sit too nicely with the kid. His brow flickers like he wants to frown, but does nothing much worse than looking hopelessly at the floor. “Nobody.”

For once, he doesn’t press. Jesse would have nothing to gain from lying. And after a certain point, his escapades lose meaning. He doesn’t need a sexual history so much as an idea of culpability. Really, for his own sake. It doesn’t matter whose child it is, now. Jack is already gone. The two conversations have happened in the wrong order.

He doesn’t ask what Jesse thinks, either. It wouldn’t matter to the kid either way. Not with Johnny dead, as he is. Not with things in an impressive disarray.

So Gabe lies there, lukewarm in himself, wondering how his life extended to find him here: a funhouse mirror of where he thought he might be, torn apart at the hands of a child. Unable to do much but hold to Jesse like Jesse holds to him, turning his head where he lies to survey the kid better.

“Provisional agent, huh?” He asks, trying to sound more peaceful. To take out the accusation of their previous conversation. Now’s not the time. “You take the BLEAT?” Forgiving as ever -- awful in his altruism like that, Jesse lifts his head and nods. “How’d you like it?”

One of Jesse’s hands unfolds into the shape of a gun and he closes one eye as if to train his gaze on Gabe, easy and playful. Sweet. “Reckon I ain’t lost a step in shootin’.” He says, haughtily, before his expression mellows slightly like he’s considered something else. Something less attractive. “Didn’t understand all of it, though.”

“Me either.” Gabe jokes, emptily. Earns himself even the faintest of a smile. He tries to recall how it runs: which order the sections come in, if the tradition sections have been revised to have a less omnich-centered focus, but all that’s coming to mind is that damn wall on the obstacle course. The idea of Jesse attempting to climb it is desperately comical to him. On that thought, he laughs. “You must be exhausted.”

Totally misunderstanding his intent, but nonetheless candid, Jesse’s eyebrows raise slightly. “Y’could say that, yeah.”

There’s a moment of silence, then. Gabe’s eyes close a little. He thinks he could sleep the rest of this dishwater world away. Thinks maybe the sleep would dull the returning and hot sensation of distant pain that aches all over him. Never in his life has he underestimated Jack: or his ability to destroy. Never will think to do it, now.

Jesse is putting on the hoodie. Rattling the pocket where some cigarettes still are. Polite enough not to go looking. He brushes the hood back and draws his knees up again, leaning his face in one hand. His own eyes close a little, as if heavy. He looks from the door to the other end of the room and then back again. Speaks softly. “Gabriel?”

Gabe’s eyes open. He locates Jesse on his horizon with ease.

“D’you mind if I jus’ get in with you?” The kid asks, quietly. Almost shyly, Gabe would say, if he didn’t know better. “Jus’ for a minute?”

Is it loneliness? Fondness? Is there something in Jesse’s system that has him seeking an alpha for some feeling of safety? God, in the end, what does it matter? What does any of it matter?
Gabe feels him shuffle slightly to one side of the bed. He doesn’t say anything. Just brushes the space with his elbow as invitation, and Jesse’s probably seen that sign before, if not a million veiled other ways to know when to crawl onto a mattress. The kid comes smiling. Climbing in next to Gabe with some great care and auspicion, afraid to hurt the man he thinks of as unbreakable. His favourite illusion.

There’s barely enough room. Neither of them make to complain. The excuse is gratefully exploited when Jesse is on his side, pressed flush against the older man, nosing at his neck practically incidentally.

There’s nothing here in particular for Jesse. Even besides Miss Amari, this place is strange to him, and even now, he yearns for the red rock of home or the hazy daydream of Mexico. But here is safe and warm, for now. Gabriel is next to him, peaceful in how he’s resting. Jesse is made gentle and calm by the scent of embers and the presence of the alpha. He thinks, maybe here, like this, Zurich might not be so bad.

This life might not be so bad, after all.

His thoughts dance around and skirt away from the idea of a baby. Of what he’s going to do. For now, he is here, and Gabriel is with him.

He can cross that bridge when he’s forced to come upon it.

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There are some mercies in the universe. Though few.

One is that Jack isn’t the one to come upon the scene of Gabriel’s convalescence; but Ana. Finds him all tangled and entwined with the Deadlock boy like some tarot card that she knows she has seen before. She had only come down to find Jesse, informed by Athena in clean and innocuous terms which room the boy was in, when she stumbles upon them from the door.

The sight of it isn’t an immediate affront. Jesse is the one she spots first, as he is closest to her, huddled up all cosy-like. The most peaceful she has seen him all the while she’s ever known the boy, pressed as close as possible to Gabriel to no doubt settle that instinct at the base of his brain to seek comfort and protection: a nest. There is no malice in the action. No sin.

The same cannot be said for Gabriel. Cradling the kid against him. Having learned nothing. Having only destroyed.

She thinks about Jack and how the stitching of the man’s life has come undone. How she found him: drunk and afraid, willing the world to leave him. To spare him, this once. How he was alone in his misery, and Gabriel appears to have none.

This isn’t about her, she knows. Hasn’t the slightest thing to do with her at all: just a stone in her at this point. It only feels like that because of Jack. Because he could have so easily found this scene alone, stumbling upon it to fight for the last word again. Stupid man: could never leave Gabriel alone much at all. Could never let a controversy lie unresolved against him or anything like that. Stupid man that he fell for it to begin with.

But, then, Gabriel did always have the charm of the defeated. Some passive cool that Ana could never have. Christ, even after all these years, her hat is still in the ring. She still wants to believe, on
some level, that she might win.

Or maybe, just like Gabriel, she wants it all for herself.

She finds one of the medical residents milling around in the same wing: Angela, to deal with the situation. Angela, a poor, bright girl, who Ana can always muster patience for. A brilliant candidate in biotic medical research, but by no measure the unluckiest. Residents and interns are always tasked with a certain amount of hours a week serving as internal medicine staff in exchange for use of the lab and through no fault of her own, her initial excitement at pulling Jack as a patient name out of the list has resulted in the girl of some nineteen years to become the very face of the Strike Commander’s dread and misery.

She’s on duty when Ana sequesters her, out in the hall, and asks if she wouldn’t mind so much keeping visitors out of private wards beyond hours. That Gabriel could well give the Deadlock boy an infection or vice versa. All good reasons, even if they do not belie Ana’s true concern.

Angela is, as ever, quite understanding, and goes off to deal with the situation. To rouse the boy. By now, she’s very good at giving hard advice.

She waits out in the corridor. After a few minutes, she sees Jesse emerge, his small frame entirely obscured by the stolen article of Gabriel’s clothing. A hand rubs at one of his eyes. He looks entirely out of place for eight in the evening, but at least he looks a little calmer. Angela is behind him, in the door, looking purposefully busy with a chart, giving Ana a look for confirmation. Ana is happy to provide it, looking over the boy’s shoulder before he comes upon her, yawning.

“I didn’t know there was rules about visitin’.” The kid opens with an easy excuse. Always at his own defense.

She doesn’t know quite what to say in response. It would be easy, she knows, so easy to write him off with Gabriel, but how much blame can the boy shoulder? He doesn’t know the full extent of Gabriel, or the damage done. Doesn’t know much beyond the places they found him. And she can feel, even despite her best sense, that terrible notion of sympathy within her. She shares the same designation as this boy, and with Jack --they have to look after one another. They have to have some solidarity, or they’ll have nothing.

There’s no fight against Jesse in her. So she lets it go, with an easy breath. “Well,” She says. “Now you know.”

They walk away from the West Wing together in a measured silence. The boy is still a little disoriented, but far less uneasy. It’s why she says nothing about the hoodie. The scent will keep the boy’s nesting instinct placated while he’s away from Gabriel. Will help keep his head clearer about the next few days. When they reach the elevator, Ana lets the boy step inside first before coming in after him.

“You must be hungry.” She notes, mildly.

The boy’s response is equally candid and quick. “Sure am.”

Ana selects a floor to the nearest large cafeteria. The smaller ones stop serving hot food earlier. “I think there’s still some of today’s trout.” She says.

The kid doesn’t exactly pipe up at that. No surprise: fish is never as popular as meat. Ana doesn’t eat
either. She wonders if Jesse shares that notion until he stuffs his fists into the hoodie pockets awkwardly and asks, “Y’got peaches?”

That surprises her, needless to say. “There’s usually a selection of fresh fruit on the--”

The boy shakes his head. “I mean like the ones in the can.” At her blankness, he gestures. “Y’know the kind I mean?”

“I know the kind.” Ana says, slowly. “I suppose I can always ask.” She looks up to see how many floors there are left to ride, utterly bemused. “Are you sure you don’t want anything else? Or anything--hot?”

Jesse seems to consider it. He looks derisive for about a second before he shakes his head. God, Ana thinks to herself, feeling suddenly so underqualified to have him in her charge--what did he survive on before? She’s not so sure she wants to know how Gabriel found him. The thought is haunting. Enough so that the rest of the journey remains silent. They walk out into another corridor and turn left towards where a large food hall is still moderately bustling for this time of the evening.

Jesse takes a seat without having to be told, looking about nervously at Overwatch agents--largely relief teams at this part of the night, a few plainclothes blackwatch assets. Nothing too out of the ordinary, but the boy still withdraws and keeps his gaze trained in no particular spot for too long.

One of the dinner staff are happy to go looking through the nearest stock cupboard at Ana’s unusual request while Jesse waits.

When she returns, can opened in hand, looking only slightly confused, the boy seems to just light up. He can hardly seem to wait when they’re placed in front of them, pushing the lid up with the prong of the fork and peering inside with clear excitement. It’s bizarre at best to watch. Ana tries to hide her perplexion as she seats herself across from him.

“You don’t have to wait for me to tell you when to eat, you know.” She says, off-handedly. “In fact, I’d much rather you didn’t. We like to keep our assets in good health.”

Looking at him is practically giving her heartburn. He has another arm right by the can he’s eating out of like he’s afraid it’s going to be snatched away. There is barely any reprieve between mouthfuls. Not unlike watching a bird go at a stray piece of bread before anyone can come by and frighten it away. Still, the boy doesn’t miss a trick, nodding at her initial words, and only stopping to ask, “Then what happened to Gabriel?”

It’s so shrewd, that she misses it at first. “Excuse me?” She asks him, plainly.

Jesse wipes at his mouth and hunches over like there’s a secret about to be shared. “What happened to Gabriel? He seemed sorta the opposite a’ ‘good health’.”


Those aren’t any of the words she settles on. “That’s a confidential matter.” Is what she says, instead, sitting up better to banish the notion that anything will be shared between the two of them that shouldn’t be.

Jesse’s head tilts in some playful pantomime of conspiracy. “Y’can tell me.”
That makes her laugh, of all things. The boy doesn’t lack nerve. And there is an undeniable charm to him, despite it all. Thinks that maybe the boy is used to having to win people over, and in the best of ways: it shows. “I could.” She says, warmly, watching him lean forward in a sort of anticipation. “But I’m not going to.”

Jesse could be sore about it, but just makes some expression of mirth instead, stabbing absently at a slice of peach, and shaking his head. “What a grift.” He shakes his head, but there’s a smile about him, and then a second later he has resumed eating.

Ana lets him. She hasn’t much else to say beyond letting him finish the can. Her day is far from done after this, anyway.

Jack’s work is still looming over, as well as Gabriel’s. Grinding Blackwatch activity to a halt is one thing: but she still has to task the agents with something. For Jesse, it’s a simple job, but for the more veteran among Gabriel’s flock (who all happen to think of Gabriel as the holy host and have a quiet and slow-burning resentment for getting their orders from Overwatch) it isn’t quite so simple. There’s an Icelandic terrorist group that’s been brought to her attention recently that she’ll shove in their direction to do some sniffing around, as well as keeping the pressure on Los Muertos and the Shimada-gumi.

Jack might have already done something by now, but that’s probably why he’s in blue. Gabriel favours to turn up the heat slowly. To watch his targets boil in the pot without realising it until it’s too late for them.

Jesse finishes up gratefully, scraping the bottom of the can until he’s satisfied it’s all gone, and only then leaving the can open for anyone else. He looks a little better for it, and for that much, Ana is glad.

She leans back herself, and tries to sound breezy in addressing him. “We’ll have your BLEAT results analysed within the next few days,” She says. He gives her his attention right away. “And then you’ll be a permanent agent and we can assign you to a company within Blackwatch.”

The boy looks frankly relieved at the notion. “So I didn’t fail, or anythin’?”

Ana laughs before she can fully help herself. “It’s not the sort of test you can fail.” Not that Jesse minds, it seems. He looks to her like he knows more is coming, and to his credit, more is. But the topic is so very delicate --Ana isn’t even sure how to broach it. In many ways, ironic in them all, she knows Jack would be better suited to this job. Always was better with his words --knows all the right moves for every one of them: every easy touch and look-away and moment to smile.

Jesse seems to sense her hesitance. A look of worry is sort of forming in his gaze. Of slight and quiet fear. He always seems so readily prepared for the worst.

“There’s something else you’ll need to do before your full induction.” That’s what she opens with. There’s already too much ambiguity to it, and she knows it. Too much uncertainty. Ana wants to be more comforting --want to see a place in time where Jesse doesn’t eat like he’s preparing to be stolen from or look around like he’s reading a room for exits. But that has to come later. The elephant has been in the room long enough.

Jesse’s head is dipped, already. She wonders if he’s made up his mind already.

“You’ll have to make a decision,” She says, with enough difficult. God, that’s not even the hard part
of the sentence, “with regards to your pregnancy.” her voice drops to say it, like she doesn’t want anybody else to know. Or maybe it’s just that she lacks the boldness to say it with any more strength. The boy looks blankly at the table and she knows she has to say something else. “Whatever you decide to do, we will--”

“Yeah.” Jesse says, passively. Like he can’t stand to hear the rest. “Yeah, I --I know.” He sighs. “Well, I don’t know, but--...”

Ana remembers, herself, how it was with Fareeha. It wasn’t peacetime, then, though. The war raged on. She had lost people of her own enough. She had been so tired of death. Wanted something beyond the fighting. It had been the furthest thing from easy, or peaceful, to carry her daughter through it all. To deliver her in a still-uncertain world. But, then, it wasn’t impossible: and Fareeha is her constant anchor, even to this day. Her reason for being, alongside it all.

“There is still time for you to decide.” She says, then, almost wistfully, reaching across the table to pet the boy’s hand. Jesse is unresponsive to the touch. He look so bleak with the indecision of it all. “And before anything else, you will see an obstetrician.”

It’s not a word Jesse seems to know, if the way he draws back if anything to go by. “What’ll they do?”

It’s asked fearfully enough that Ana knows she hasn’t handles this so well. “It’s nothing to worry over.” She assures him. “You’ll likely be given a pelvic exam and a dating scan. They might ask you a few questions, but all of that will be confidential.” Jesse doesn’t look eased by it. She wonders if there’s anything she could say to make this less daunting. “You get to see the baby, if you like.”

Jesse breathes out through his nose. He looks at an absolute loss, and Ana knows, if she’s honest with herself, there’s nothing she can say to make this any nicer. “You don’t have to tell me what you decide to do. That’s for you to discuss with your obstetrician. They’ll talk you through all of your options.”

It’s quiet, then, for a long time. Jesse is practically laying his head on his arms, defeated in his posture, uncertain. He’s just a boy, after all. Thrust suddenly into a world that both confuses, frightens and delights him, with only Gabriel as an absent guide.

She feels for him, in as much as she can. Jesse has all the choice in the world. Jack never had any.

“Can I talk to Gabriel?” He asks her, eventually. The asking comes in a voice all the softer.

Ana nods. “Of course.”

That seems to settle Jesse slightly. He nods, and then gazes across the table again with that glazed sort of look. None of the satisfaction of the peaches or the scent of Gabriel clinging to him can do much to make this any less of a jagged pill to swallow. He’s been met with a fate that’s hardly kind or just, but to Ana’s understanding, that’s how fate is. All she can do it make this easy for him. For them all.

Jesse pipes up, after another long silence. “I think I wanna get some rest.” The boy says, distant in his tone. Evasive. Ana can understand that.

“Of course.”
She’s more than happy to let the conversation naturally pause there. No sense in keeping it going. Jesse stands, clearly eager with the same intent to leave, and he follows her out of the now dwindling food hall and back towards the elevator. They step inside one after the other, and she selects his floor without feeling the need to say ought else. She purposefully looks away, too when she notices the way Jesse is burying his face in the collar of the hoodie.

They ride the floors in silence again, until Jesse surprises her.

“Miss Amari?” He asks her, if only to get her attention. When she turns her face towards him, he looks away almost shyly, but goes on to ask. “If --If I was gonna--” The words seem to present a great difficulty to him. He starts over. “Say I wanted to, uh --to give my baby up for --for, uh--”

Hearing him struggle is worse than interrupting him to suggest, “Adoption?”

The boy nods. “Yeah.” He swallows. “Say I did that.” He cants his head awkwardly. “Would I be able to --to find out who was raisin’ it, maybe, an’ after a few years--”

Ana hates every word of it. Hates that it’s said with nothing but good intent. With kindness. “It doesn’t work like that.” She says. “You don’t have any legal parental rights after you’ve given up a child.” She tries to remember what she knows when she was investigating her own options, but it was so many years ago, and she feels as if she has nothing but bad news. “You wouldn’t be able to find anything out unless it--”

Her mouth opens and shuts. She frowns. “...Unless it was privately arranged by another party.”

Jesse doesn’t register the moment she’s having at all. Doesn’t register it at all.

He isn’t thinking of Jack like she’s thinking.

Isn’t thinking of Jack at all.

Doesn’t understand her sudden withdrawal as she walks him to his door from the elevator with this sort of pensive silence like she’s thinking over something particularly hard. Like she’s realised how the dominoes have lined up at last, that could either fall with some great cruelty or some divine justice. She can see it all, suddenly, from where she stands. But the boy has no sight of the valley below.

No, Jesse is still adrift unto himself. Looking to her, alone, for guidance.

“I’ll escort you to the appointment on wednesday.” She leaves him with, breaking her reverent silence to speak with clarity and decisiveness. Like she’s finally found the right words. “I advise you to have had some thoughts on what you might like to decide to do before then.”

Jesse looks towards his room and then back towards Ana ruefully. “Can I talk to Gabriel about it?” He asks, again.

She thinks about Gabriel. About how, from where he’s lying, he can probably see the valley below, too.

“I advise you do.” She says.

And she means it, too.
it's been too long --sorry about that.
so i’m dying and in hell (crippling debt), brother could u spare a comment? im not gonna
ask for commissions, that'd be dead cheeky, just validation pls.

as ever, my eternal and undying love to jack, to avery and to all of you. i has a real crisis
of confidence writing this. let me know people are still remotely interested?

**please grant me the virtue of ignorance. if there's something you think needs fixing or
tagging, bring it up for sure, but don't tell me if and when you decide you'd had enough
of me/this. not the best feeling to be given.

Jesse’s spent plenty of time alone.

Between jobs, in the early days, playing lookout on rooftops and making patterns in the red rust with
his feet or fingertips. Between men, in his little room back at the motel, where he could run a bath or
turn on the radio or keep himself occupied. This isn’t new to him: the shut door and silent space. But
he still hardly knows what to do with himself.

Miss Amari’s words hang over his head.

Decisions to be made. Plans to implement.

Hell, all Jesse can keep his thoughts on is Johnny Ringo. About how he’d come, that afternoon, on
Jesse’s birthday, with the bottle of drink and the peaches and the stock. How he was above Jesse, on
the sheets, moving his hips like the jagged blade of a coping saw cutting through gnarled wood:
erratic but incidentally and occasionally tender.

Johnny’s hat is still sitting on the bed. Still all blood-marked and dirty. Jesse doesn’t think he looks so
good in it, but for some reason that doesn’t feel important when he arranges the bedsheets into some
welled, circular structure, with the hat in the middle and Jesse curled around it. He couldn’t say why
he does it: rather, acts without thinking, and feels some minor relief once it’s done.

The jacket he’d taken from Gabriel is thick and warm, but worn in a nice way. There’s a half-empty
carton of cigarettes in the pocket that Jesse has been publicly ignoring, but is now free in his isolation
to take out and rummage though. The brand is unfamiliar, but that doesn’t matter to him much by the
time it’s lit, and the first drag of it stills him like nothing else on earth.

He exhales smoke with some quiet noise of contentment. That, for all the chaos of the world, he is
alone here, in this circle of sheets, gentled by the scent of Johnny, and of Gabriel, but most of all by
tobacco.

Jesse can’t remember a time it wasn’t present in some scene of his life. The dusty faces of the men
who chewed it, the tang of nicotine from the woman who held his hand. Smoky bars and pool halls,
lighting one to still his nerves before a client and between a line of coke. How Miss Marie used to
watch and chain them in her chair, one after the other, back to back. Proud tradition, he think, derisively, but continues all the same.

It’s enough, for a while. At least, in so much that he can nestle up and close his eyes and it sort of feels like Gabriel just left his motel room and he knows nobody else will be coming by until morning. Like the world is less of a mess.

It’s all the comfort in the world, and then he moves his hand over his stomach and it’s no comfort at all.

Jesse isn’t sure he’s afraid. Thinks maybe he should be --this isn’t like last time, and he’s sure the chance of going to prison are going to about triple if he decides against the baby. But, Jesus, what then? He knows he needs to talk to Gabriel. Thinks he could shoulder just about anything with Gabriel on his side: good and patient and kind. Unlike anything else that the dusty mesa wind ever brought in.

And either way, he figures, feeling over where he can feel the change in his form: the warm firmness of his stomach, present like he isn’t used to --regardless of his own indecision, his body knows what to do. Not in spite or consideration of him. Some fact of life.

Omegas have been bearing children since the dawn of things, Jesse guesses, and he’s no more special or different than any of them.

Maybe it just surprises him --how little he’s really thought about it. Surely he should have, by now. At least entertained the notion: of a dusky little child with Johnny’s sharp eyes or that soft but dangerous temperament of Gabriel’s. Or of getting all big, near the end, with somebody looking after him and making him all comfortable and safe. Because he hasn’t really. Not in so many words. Not in any words, really, but there’s a vague idea in his head, that maybe --maybe here, it wouldn’t be so bad.

The ‘it’, of course, is meaningless. After all, the very last thing Jesse has thought about is a baby. That’s what it is, he knows, but to him the concept is still abstract and false. It isn’t fully realised to him, even now, feeling over where he knows it is. There are no flutters or signs of life. Nothing at all but the slight swell under his hand.

It makes him uncomfortable enough to climb out of bed.

Jesse doesn’t like the idea that his body isn’t his anymore. It’s --well, it was his livelihood. And it’s him, isn’t it? Is that stupid to say? That he’s scared Gabriel wouldn’t want him anymore if he was different? He gets up and walks over to the mirror by the door to his shower, continuing to smoke, taking Johnny’s hat with him. He puts it on as he steps into view of the reflection: the clean, rested reflection hiding in clothes that don’t fit.

He looks at his own eyes. His own face, dark in shadow under the brim of the hat, like he’s some figure from a movie. Not much has changed there. Still got most of his teeth. Still got that mean look and knows how to hold a lean like he saw the deadlock boys do outside the high side when he was so much younger and thought was the neatest damn thing.

They’re long gone, now. Just like Johnny. So Jesse takes off the hat, sheepishly, his smile fading as he feels so suddenly disrespectful. Places it down next to his feet, and then all that’s left of his reflection is Gabriel’s hoodie, large and warm but marked, nonetheless. Some strange white logo in a circle of red.
Jesse doesn’t know how much difference there is between that badge and the one he used to serve under—the one inked into the skin of his arm. Doesn’t know if it matters, really.

He takes that off, too, then, taking in as much of Gabriel’s scent as he can when it slips over his head and joins Johnny’s hat on the floor, careful to keep his cigarette in his mouth without setting himself on fire. It leaves him in just the shirt and pants they’d issued him, hanging off most of his body, with a different logo over the left of his chest embroidered there. Jesse thinks he ought to take those off, too, but hesitates—unsure of what he’ll find, or if he likes what he’ll find.

But he knows he’ll have to, one way or another. Just like he’ll have to talk to Gabriel. And he’ll have to make a decision.

He had sort of wished Miss Amari would give him more guidance. Wished that she’d corral him into something, instead of giving him that kind, understanding sort of look like she’d back him either way.

Jesse doesn’t know what angle she’s working. But she’s working one, alright.

The room is dim of it’s own accord, as if trying to mimic the cycle of the sun outside. Still lit, but gently: enough so that Jesse can see himself in decent detail when he slips his shirt over his head, just like the hoodie, letting out a nice breath of smoke once it’s over. With what he’s faced with, he knows he’s going to need the relief of it.

For starters, his little stint in prison has done enough. The food—if you could call it that, had been regular enough. That’s at least part of the reason that even when he lifts his arms up, he can’t quite make out the shape of all of his bones underneath. Not like he used to. That’s all over him, though—this layer of softness that’s made him a little easier to touch. Jesse doesn’t care too much either way for that.

It’s the other stuff. How he feels tired all of the time. How the idea of food has lost it’s appeal to him. How he’s making circles with his bedsheets and holding onto Gabriel’s clothes because it’s the only thing that can get him to calm enough to stay still.

And it’s the way his stomach swells from between his hipbones in a way that scares him enough that he’s standing there, staring in the mirror, looking at himself for advice that a boy of barely nineteen isn’t qualified to give.

Jesse finishes the cigarette miserably.

He needs to talk to Gabriel. Gabriel will know what to do.

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It’s not often Gabe is at a loss.

But it’s not often Gabe finds himself suspended.

Certainly, Blackwatch has been ‘suspended’ on many occasions and in many places, for violation of sovereignty and all sorts of other, weak reasons that have him pretending to sit on his hands and taking his clumsier agents off of duty and his quieter ones off the books. But Gabe has never himself had to cease function of his unit. Never been given leave or order to just stop.
Jack might as well have given him a *cease and desist*. Suspended, he thinks. Jack would die before pulling rank like this. Would never put anything professional between them after all of his overly-auspicious apologies about being in charge of Gabe. Suspended *–jesus*, for it to have come to this Gabe knows he must have hurt Jack something bad.

Something he won’t be coming back from easily.

He doesn’t even get the grace of receiving the news privately. It’s Angela –the embodiment of all of his pain, somehow, that tells him as she gives him his discharge summary. Gabe doesn’t feel any means ready to put boots on the ground again, and tries to to tell her as much, only for Angela to explain, in that curt little voice of hers ‘*your personnel records state you’re under suspension. I thought you knew*’.

Maybe that’s why he’s allowed to limp out of the infirmary the way he is, stuck together with rolls of triangle bandage, one arm in a sling to prevent any further injury to it, his ribs held together by a binding of more bandage. They ache the worst. Coughing is almost as painful as he imagines laughter is going to be. He’ll probably have to sleep sitting up to survive.

He doesn’t know what he’s going to do with himself. Doesn’t know what to do about Blackwatch, if indeed, he can do anything. Doesn’t know what to do about Jesse, or the baby. Least of all about Jack.

But there’s no prescription for that. As ever, Angela leaves him disappointed, with a nod, and Gabe has to stagger out of the ward wondering how to face the world as he is: helpless to its whims.

He doesn’t even have anywhere he thinks he can go. Not to Blackwatch halls, or to his office, if there’s no work to be done. And certainly not back to their room --well, Jack’s room, now, after the revelations of the last few days. Gabe knows he has a room here. It’s regulatory, but, Christ, he’s barely ever seen the inside of it, and it holds none of his things or memories or clothes. All of that is with Jack, in a place and time he knows he’s locked out of, now.

What’s he locked out with? Nothing. He doesn’t even think he could handle seeing Jesse today, his dearest mistake --the kid’s eyes staring right at him for guidance that Gabe doesn’t have. Never had, really, no matter how collected he must have seemed perched on that motel room bed.

There’s an irony in that that follows him all the way to the elevator at the end of the hall. Not that he has any direction, but it’s something to do: stand inside and select a floor. He should eat. Or --or check in with some of the company men, if that, too, isn’t considering a violation of his suspension. Most of them will be eating at this time of day: Gabe can see a cluster of them on a cafeteria holoslide.

Then, out of curiosity, and some latent desire to see a job done right (even now, considering it all), he swipes up at an information panel. He’s wondering if Jack hasn’t put himself in charge of Blackwatch for the next two weeks, or if he hasn’t delegated it off. Gabe wouldn’t be surprised if his clearance has been stripped, too, so he won’t even be able to find out.

He’s overestimating Jack there, it seems, when he slides up and find Ana as the acting command of the unit. As if purely to add insult to injury.

Gabe wants to be surprised but finds himself once again at a loss. He doesn’t have anything to his name anymore. Nothing but the itchiness under his skin that he recognises as withdrawal: that twitch
that rattles pill bottles and gives the game away.

He needs to take his mind off of it. He needs work.

It’s come to this much, then: he needs to talk to Ana.

His strangest enemy. The largest threat to him, somehow --that has found him from inside of the organization. She appears, according to the slide, in her office. It’s not neutral ground in the slightest. Blue isn’t even a neutral colour anymore, but it’s what he knows he has to head for.

They’re overdue a conversation, he thinks.

About what she knew. What she told Jack. What she’s told Jesse.

(Or what it was Gabe must have done, all those years ago, when they met, that planted some seed in her mind that has grown as a wedge between them for years, now. What his original sin was; if it wasn’t Jack.)

She’s in the north side of the building. It’s not too far a walk, and thankfully, he passes by no cafeteria or mezzanine room or residential section where anything else might be lurking. And it’s professional, he has to remind himself. It’s not a he-said-she-said excuse for bullshit. She’d only have Jack cut him off worse if it comes to that, anyway, so he tries to rehearse it in his own head: saying his piece about Blackwatch and what he thinks needs to be done, and then leaving. Nothing more, nothing less.

It’s not easy to try to let it all go --or even put it on hold. Gabe finds the only way he can set his temper to tender is to recall the way she looked when she was holding Jack up.

God, at least Jack won’t have to face all of this alone.

Jesus; Jack.

Ana’s office is at the end of a long corridor. There are a few people milling about, mostly benign or secretarial in their manner, and none give Gabe too much of a second look as he comes upon the door. He’s only here for business. To make sure the last few careful months of slow pressure on drug syndicates both overseas and south of the border comes to fruition, and not sudden terror, like with Deadlock.

He just wants the job done properly: that’s all. Just wants to make sure there’s no more incidents and accidents that end up with Overwatch’s name dragged into a limelight that ruins Jack’s complexion as he’s forced to explain why he couldn’t protect--...

Jesus, he’s doing this for Jack, isn’t he? All of it. Some consolation prize.

Gabe knows (almost as well as Ana knows) that if you’ve done something right, nobody will be sure you’ve done anything at all.

He comes upon her door quietly. Lifts his hand to knock --the one not slung and bandaged. It’ll come off in a week’s time. Angela has used the words ‘recovery’ and ‘healed’ and that’s how he knows that she is ignorant to the true extent and origin of his injuries. He doesn’t think this is something that is so easy to recover from.
Gabe never does get to knock.

His wrist twists forward as the door opens. Jack opens it.

Jack --in the door. Hand on the inside handle.

Gabe’s arm drops --inertia overwhelming him: his heart leaping like a frog in his throat, as if expecting an extra stair at the top of a staircase and falling through the air in some surreal confusion. He doesn’t know where to put his hands. Doesn’t know what to do.

He wants to look Jack in the eye --if Jack will let him. Wants to, but knows it to be too brazen. Too much, too soon, so he skirts his gaze away, and then sees it.

Stiff, white. The corner of what must be a square bandage, peeking ever-so-slightly out of the high collar of Jack’s compression shirt. Sitting over where his mark would be. Starved of air. A deliberate action. To heal the mark. To remove it. That’s usually how it’s done.

Gabe’s gaze is stuck to it like a poisonous dart. Barely two seconds have they been looking at each other. It already hurts.

Then two seconds is up. Jack is moving past him in the door. There is no last look. No loss, or longing, or conversation. Their shoulders collide as Jack moves past, his face greyer, white creeping into his hair more and more. Stranger. Lover. Nothing. Gabe is only given the barest benefit of Jack’s scent, but the sharp frost and wintergreen has changed none. And even after it all, the instinct tugs at Gabe. A part of him is wont to recognise his mate.

And he knows a part of Jack must do the same. Doesn’t it?

Laws of silence won’t work. Gabe can’t stand it. Jack keeps walking and --stifled, conflicted, Gabe hears himself call out in some strange, clipped tone. “Jack.”

Behind him, then, Ana interjects. “Don’t.”

He didn’t even hear her move, but nonetheless, she appears, standing in the arch of her door, arms crossed, posture hostile. Her eyes on Gabriel. Not Jack. Full of warning that is every bit as wrathful and righteous as his opposition, and seemingly sprung from the same well, too. There is no room for argument in her voice: no friendly inch breathing a slice of air.

And he knows it, too, when he goes forward, helplessly, scared to stand idly while he watches Jack walk away in more ways than one but halted once again by her. “Gabriel.”

Softer, this time. As if with feeling.

If there is any (feeling, that is), he can be sure it’s not for his benefit.

Softer, but he only realises the threat latent there when she says, “Gabriel.” So he turns back around to look at her, the hard stern of her face and the iron she wields in her gaze. It holds his attention for long enough that when he looks back up the corridor, there’s no sight of Jack anymore. No sound of his footsteps. No dreamlike impression of his scent in the stillness of the air.

Ana is still standing there when he turns back around, heart in his throat. Disoriented and weak. Jack is gone. And without him, Gabe has lost the directions for how to go up. It seems of no concern to
her at all. She stays in the doorway looking utterly untouched. Or unreadable. Both, probably.

After a few seconds, when she’s sure she has his attention, she speaks. “Come inside.” Is what she says. Like some command. Gabe doesn’t have resistance in him. Stuck on that corner of stiff white bandage. Of loss. Cowed enough into submitting at a single instruction.

Ana leads. He follows.

She goes around her desk to sit down and indicates to the chair in front of her. “Sit down.” She says, blandly, as if she doesn’t care deeply either way if he remains stood or not. Gabe doesn’t care; he sits. Pointedly doesn’t look at the records on her desk for very long; Jesse’s records and a few marked with a Blackwatch stamp.

Instead, he looks across at her, and she looks at him. “There’s something we have to discuss.” Is what she says,

And, for once, Gabe agrees with her.

Jesse’s no stranger to nudity.

But, honestly? He likes it an awful lot more when the person asking him to take his pants off is one of those handsome, frontier types perched on his bed in a similar state of dress. Maybe with a bottle of whiskey. He’d pick that any day over the woman who greets him, her eyes obscured by her glasses, a thick plait like some strand of rope coming down over her left shoulder as he tells him in some uninterested voice to ‘strip from the waist down’.

He still does, of course. They give him a screen and everything to change behind, and Jesse almost laughs out loud to see it.

It would make him more comfortable to do it in front of her. Would make it more familiar, and less clinical, but Jesse governs himself that much, at least.

Once he’s undressed, he comes back around into her view, seeing an examination table of a sort, with some strange footrests coming off the end. He tries not to think too deeply about it, but even then, that only gets him so far when he’s instructed to sit, and place his feet apart.

Of all the things Jesse’s ever been asked to do --this might be his least favourite. It takes him back to a place he doesn’t much like: whiskey-addled, biting at a cloth to keep himself quiet, legs apart, somebody in white between them. Johnny on the other side of the wall.

Sixteen, and that’s why. It was no way to be. They had to get him fixed.

Is that why he keeps his knees together? Why he feels so suddenly sick?

The lady in white: now sitting, moves closer to the space between his legs and coughs politely as she drapes a sheet over him --for his modesty, he guesses. He still can’t see her eyes, and can’t scent her, either, some strange blank antiseptic where something organic ought to lie. There’s no telling what she is, and for some reason,that frightens Jesse.

“You can take a moment to get comfortable, if you like.” She says, in a voice just as plain. “We can
start when you’re--”

It it were up to Jesse, they’d never start. All of this is only at Miss Amari’s insistence, so he grits his teeth and moves his knees apart and coughs out, “Jus’ do it.”

He remembers cold, from before. Something sharp, and painful. There was a cut, and some terrible, raw stretch. There was no waiting for him to be comfortable. No relief. They’d given him something sour to drink and that had been it. At least it had been quick. Over in ten minutes on some bed in a backroom that Jesse had never even been in before.

He’d limped home afterwards, lamely, bleeding over his thighs. He thinks he passed out, at some point. Thinks Johnny took him the rest of the way.

He’s out of his mind by the time he sees the woman in white move, bracing himself, jaw set hard and tight--but the cold never comes. Nothing probes the space between his legs. Instead, two latex-gloved hands settle themselves low on his body. Lukewarm, just under the line of his shirt, and pressing gently where the change has happened most, and his stomach is fullest.

Jesse looks down in confusion.

The woman in white doesn’t look up at him. Continues to probe away happily, pressing on the right side a little, and then the left, tracing up the plane of the small bump and then down. he thinks, after a few hot seconds, that he might be blushing. Doesn’t think he’s been touched that tenderly in a while--thinks it’s more intimate than most of his working afternoons.

After a few seconds, he hears her speak. “Is this painful, at all?”

She presses against him again with two fingers. It’s firm enough to register, but there’s no other feeling to accompany the bare sensation. Jesse shakes his head woodenly. “Naw.” He murmurs, eventually, when he realises she isn’t looking up at him.

“And here?” Her hand moves. But nothing about the feeling of it changes. Jesse wonders if it’s supposed to be.

“Nope.”

Her hands move further up, placed on on top of the other when she pushes in again, a few inches short of the bottom of his ribcage, her silence acting as some kind of monitor. “Would you take a deep breath in for me?” Wordlessly, Jesse complies. “And all the way out.”

They do that once more. Jesse doesn’t ask why. It doesn’t seem to matter when she rises, after a few minutes, turning back to the desk to record something. It’s only a minute--if that, or a reprieve before she’s back between his closed knees. She looks up at him, then, and that only makes him feel all the stranger.

“Would you like to move your feet into the stirrups, for me?” She asks him, mildly, and Jesse wonders if she wants an honest answer to that. He is inert for a moment or two before sliding his ankles forward until his feet find themselves parted, facing out, as if designed to humiliate him.

There was none of this before.

None of this. Not of the table he’s on being adjusted so he’s sort of sat up, unable to much look away
at the top of the woman in white’s head and how her hair parts in an imperfect zigzag. Unable to feign ignorance or comfort when she lifts the middle of the sheet between his legs, so she can see it all and he can see nothing.

There’s a second when she leans back to roll a wheeled table towards them --one with a series of instruments on that make Jesse tighten again in anxiety. He wishes it would just happen --whatever it is. Wishes it would just be over when her hand curls around something and brings it under she horizon line of the sheet that’s tight between his knees and then--

*Click.*

The woman in white looks at Jesse above the line of the sheet imploringly. “I’m just going to examine you.” She says, then, modestly. “There shouldn’t be any pain, but my hands may be a little cold.”

Jesse sees that she’s waiting on his word. His --his ‘consent’, he reckons they call it. Not that it’s ever meant much. Nothing worth less than thirty dollars tends to. When he realises that she really is waiting for him, and no fooling with it, either, he nods. “G’head.” He murmurs, sheepishly.

Then the woman in white disappears behind the line of the sheet again and Jesse tightens, nervously, when he feels a rightfully cold hand place itself under his balls and move them slightly, as if getting them out of the way. It’s done so clinically, the only part of him being touched at all, and in exactly the same way as before. He doesn’t need to be much of a doctor to know what she’s looking for: the line right beneath where his testicles sit.

The same place he remembers the thrill of something cold last time. And then that sharp, agonising tear that felt like it was cutting him from jaw to backside in one fell swoop.

But now --instead, he feels what must be the barest tip of a finger trace the line there. Scar tissue, probably, old wounds changing shape as his body develops into something fit to serve as a birth canal. It’s noticeable to her, he guesses, by the way she seems to fearfully linger. It’s invisible to everybody else --not that anybody really goes looking.

She wants to ask, too, he can tell. It’s obvious in the way she sets him down gently to turn back to her mounted holoslide. He can see his name written backwards at the top of it. Figures it must be a medical history, but that won’t help her. The whole thing had been entirely unofficial.

Jesse doesn’t know how long he’d been in the way he was. Didn’t know much of anything --hell, didn’t even know what the dimpling flesh the woman is inspecting was, or what at the time it was maturing to be.

Nobody had ever explained to him about having babies. Not until after, and even then, Jesse’s insides felt like dishwater and he reckoned the education wasn’t so good anymore. Reckoned himself barren either way.

But the woman in white doesn’t know any of this, and --still looking very much perplexed, she leans back towards him, sat straight, so he can see her face. She’s going to ask, isn’t she? He can tell that much before her mouth even opens.

“There --there looks to be some scarring, here.” She says, gently, like she’s afraid to say in. That it might hurt him in some way. “It’s consistent with delivery, but there’s no record here of--...” Frowning, she turns back to his slide, and then back to Jesse, perplexed. “Have you delivered a child
before?"

Jesse thinks about Johnny. Bright blue eyes. How he used to say the word ‘baby’ so easy and cool, like it didn’t mean a thing. He feels a little sick.

“Not--...” He swallows. “Not delievered.” It feels strange to say out loud. Doesn’t think he ever said a word about it. Not even to Johnny. The silence between them was taken as mutual understanding. “I weren’t much in a position for, uh --for delivery.”

The woman in white looks away from him, then. At some spot on the wall as she nods. Her pity isn’t much needed. It’s late, anyhow. That was years ago. What does Jesse care about it now? It’d been the kindest thing to do. The best. There might have been a place for children in Deadlock, but not childhood. It doesn’t bear saying out loud, though. Jesse doesn’t think it’s so easy to understand.

What he’s already said seems worth something. The woman in white goes back over to his file to note something down --probably what he’s just told her. Jesse stays where he is, cold between the legs, feeling vulnerable.

It takes thirty seconds, maybe less, and then her presence is back between his knees, waiting on his word. “Are you happy to continue?”

Jesse could roll his eyes at a question like that. He doesn’t, though. “As a clam.” He tells her, and that really is the least of it.

Her hands are still cold on him, probing gently and thoughtfully for not more than a minute or so, and then she’s done. Then she’s rolling off a glove and discarding it as she turns on her stool. Jesse’s practically halfway off the table until he’s stopped.

“I’m sorry.” She begins with, which is strange unto itself. “Only one more thing, and then you’ll be free to go.”

There’s always just one more thing, isn’t there?

Jesse is at least allowed to put his pants back on, and that much, he is grateful for. He heads back behind the screen to dress, but pauses to feel over the scar she’d found, bent as he is, unable to feel much of anything at all but the early and initial changes. The inability to find it as she had embarrassed him. Makes him feel only less qualified to be there, so he dresses again and tries to think of something else.

Back around the screen, the woman in white is waiting for him, now adjusting some part of a sleek, screened machine. On seeing him, she gives a tight smile, and nods, “Would you like to lay down?”

There’s a lot Jesse wants. To lie down here again isn’t one of those things. But there he is, less than ten seconds later, back on the table, only now with slightly more dignity. He leans on his elbows to watch her fiddle with something, and then she turns back to him, with some white, plastic bottle. “Would you mind lifting up your shirt for me?”

She’s serious, too. Christ, Jesse has never had to undress in such a bizarre way. It feels somehow more personal for him to take the shirt off, too, as he is exposing some vulnerability in doing so. He does, of course, keeping a hold of the fabric of the shirt, balled up in his fist.

“There.” The woman in white says, pleas, moving the white bottle over him. Jesse feels himself
move backwards a little. “No cause for alarm.” She tells him, quickly, aborting her motions. “I’m just going to use a little.”

Jesse’s head tilts. “What is it?”

She smiles, patiently. “Gel.” She says. “Just to help conduct the signal, so I can get a clear image of the fetus.” As if waiting on his word again, Jesse nods to give her some kind of go-ahead. Miss Amari had said about this -- ‘you get to see the baby, if you like’. The gel is startlingly cold, and the woman in white spreads it methodically, before reminding him in some deliberate tone, “you don’t have to watch if you don’t want to.”

He thinks he’d like to. He doesn’t know. There’s only one way to find out, anyway.

It is marked as one of Jesse’s stranger experiences almost immediately. Despite the thrill of the cold, and then the slight pressure, because then he can see some distorted black and white shapes, stretching out as the woman in white moves, finally settling somewhere and allowing the strange images onscreen settle into something that resemble what might as well be a fable to him.

The curved rise a a head, soft as fontanelle. The obscure image of pinprick legs drawn in defensively, or sleepily. One arm bent, the other open, entirely ignorant to the mess of things out here or all of the trouble that’s been caused.

Jesse lays his eyes on it almost incidentally, trying to identify all that he’s seeing at first but then unable to tear his gaze away.

In all his years, he could never have fathomed this. Never thought to make the connection: to extend his thought, stuck as he’d been on the concept of being pregnant. Hadn’t even began to try to imagine this: of something real and feasible, it’s form fluttering where a heart is still growing, turning in tiny little somersaults.

Maybe it’s supposed to be a moment of wonderment, or love. That he’s supposed to look at it and have this great change of heart where he realises that this is what he wants, now -- to play at house with Gabriel, but in reality, the moment is about as far from wonderment as possible. Jesse only stares because he can’t believe it -- doesn’t want to. The idea of it inside of him, and the sight, it makes him feel dizzy and nauseous and small.

So far he’s had no say at all about any of it. Never asked for this. Never asked for anything, but his stomach continues to grow and the image onscreen continues to wiggle like some dull rumour of somebody else’s war.

Jesse has practically forgotten that he isn’t alone when the woman in white finally speaks again, in that mild little voice of hers, murmuring. “Everything looks generally good.”

That phrase feels like providence. Jesse has to ask. “Gen’rally?” Has to wonder if signs of warning are evidence of defense mechanism. Of his own fear trying to prevent this from getting any further.

She looks over at him, with amusement veiled in her expression. “Well, it’s just--” Her head dips. “With your most recent bloodwork, I’d put you at about thirteen weeks, but the baby is a little smaller than I’d like.”

The question of ‘why?’ is implicit in her tone, but she doesn’t ask. Jesse could hardly have an answer -- between the cigarettes and the prison stint and the gunshot wound and losing Johnny and his home
and his life. All of things he feels suddenly guilty and every bit defensive for.

He doesn’t want a child.

But he doesn’t want to lose Gabriel --or get sent back to prison, neither.

His mother probably didn’t want a child either, but Jesse’d been forced into this world somehow, and the lack of memory of any salient figure in his life, stroking his hair or watching his back or even giving him any sort of guidance has stuck with him like some old injury. He thinks he’s been looking everywhere for that sort of love. Thinks he sees it at the back of every woman who doesn’t curse him out right away. Miss Marie. Miss Amari. Wouldn’t it be better to spare any other child that loss? Wouldn’t it be merciful, at least?

Jesus, what does Jesse know about mercy, anyway? He’s hardly seen any. Hardly has any to give. Mercy seems pale in the face of other things. Things like being kept here, in his own rooms, free to come and go and wander.

But being kept here comes at a price, and Jesse knows that. If he wasn’t alone in doing it --if he had Gabriel, he thinks maybe he could manage. Supposes Gabriel, in all his quiet dignity, and his knowledge of mercy, and his gentle hands and his wise eyes and his advanced years: he’d probably be real good with babies. Probably thought about having some at some point, if that mark on his neck is much to go by.

But what if he hasn’t? What if he’s thought about it and outright rejected the notion?

Miss Amari had said that giving the baby away would give Jesse no legal rights. Hell, he wouldn’t know what to do with them if he had them anyway, and gets to thinking maybe there are people out there full of love. People just like the ones he’s seen on screens and advertisements, who are all smiles and warmth and who want nothing more than to take this kid in, all grateful.

But there are also people who are cruel and loveless. People Jesse remembers from before Deadlock --houses he’d ran from, terrified, bleeding.

There’s no right choice. No way to determine which way is best.

All he knows is that not a one of them here would have the heart to send him back to prison pregnant. If he decided to give the baby up, what then? They could send him back afterwards, still. And it’s a long time and an awful lot of suffering if it’d come to nothing anyway. More, maybe, than forcing himself to learn how to look after a child himself. Jesse can’t replicate what he’s never seen. Could learn, then, but is that really what he wants?

Jesse thinks about Mexico. Long stretches of land. Sugar cubes and horses. There’s room, he thinks, in that place of his own that exists entirely in his mind, for an intimate sort of stranger. Sometimes Johnny. Mostly Gabriel.

But there’s no room for anyone else.

He realises he’s off in thought only when he’s interrupted --a small, well-meaning question that draws his attention back to the other person in the room, and back to the image of the baby on the screen, idly squirming away, separate and distant entirely from Jesse’s turmoil. Unaware of the delicate balance of bad, weird luck that has found the both of them here.
Every bit as unaware, the woman in white smiles. Asks him, “Would you like a picture?”

There’s something stuck in his throat to hear it. Jesse thinks she should be joking. Thinks he could cry.

Wrong, on both counts: he’s sick, instead.

Jack is the one who starts things. Ana finishes them.

Even his work.

She never means for it to happen. Never even meant to do it before it became habit to her. But it’s what happens: she wades through endless reams of work, none of which is personal to her, or makes any real sense. None of which she is supposed to be doing. See --Ana never meant to be a substitute to him. Never meant to be here, like this.

Always wanted to think of herself more as some partner. Some equal. But the crisis changed her mind about a lot of things, and so did Fareeha. And so did the nights, between tensions so terrible they still wake her in fright, when she’d sit outside and Jack would join her and they wouldn’t even say anything. Gabriel would be sleeping, the baby would be at peace --both of them could stop pretending, for five minutes.

When did she start pretending for him? Was it when she saw the Gabriel-shaped mark on his neck? When she first heard about the future of his universe, and found herself to be only some orbiting celestial body, nowhere near the centre, and certainly not the axis he planned to spin on?

It’s been years, and here they are: Jack keeps her dreams, for now, and she pays attention for him. Jack starts some riot, and Ana finishes it.

Only tonight, she’s finished all she can. Finds herself finished, of all things.

And goes to start something, for first. For once.

He’s marked as off-duty. In his residential rooms --his little heart of chambers, solitary in himself. She can hear him, even from outside his door shuffling around, his footsteps familiar to her: warm in their pattern and timbre. She can feel the weight of each step shift as if he is walking over her chest. She took Jack’s bottles, too, and doesn’t remember why she’s come here --not in so many words. That’s only occurred to her after she’s knocked. But it doesn’t matter, anyway.

It takes him an uncharacteristic amount of time to shuffle over to the door. The sound of him draws closer, steaming over some ocean, with a breathless heaviness to it, and Ana hardly knows what to do with herself at all because then the door is open and Jack is standing there, filling the frame with the broadness of his form, his eyes so --so sad, still, full of a muted pain like a cauterised wound: unable to be treated until later.

Sealed for now, doing neither Jack nor his injuries any the better.

Behind his shoulders is moderate darkness, almost purple in its thickness. The main light is off. There’s a source of illumination that’s lacking that Ana can’t see from here.
She can see the corner of the bandage he’d had applied to his neck has been disturbed. The corners feeling up a if been worried at with the tips of his fingers. Jack’s mind changing? His resolve wearing? Never did know when to give up --least of all when it comes to Gabriel. And there’s nothing to be said for that, so she moves past him, into his room.

He says nothing; but closes the door after her.

Inside is smoky as before, but there are no bottles. Drawers have been closed. The place is in far less a state of disrepair, and for that, she’s glad up until she sees the course of the room’s illumination. A slide, projected onto the far wall. Some old picture is open on top of others, centered and in focus. Some candid she hardly recognises, years old now, taken a few days after the major crisis resolution.

She was there, but isn’t pictured. It’s some simple shot, the backs of Jack and Gabriel respectively, walking through the then-settled ruins of a street. Their hands are touching in the most minimal sense. Shy to seek comfort or intimacy but there, nonetheless, in spite of it all. The size of the gesture is no matter when everything that needs to be there is there in the way that Jack’s fingertip is tracing the inside of Gabriel’s palm like he’s writing their future together in that single picture.

Some war photographer’s lucky find. Part of a private collection now --Jack’s. There, plastered over a series of other pictures, and headlines hidden in lower tabs. She can see the way the newsprint throbs through the intimacy of it. Angry black letters making demands. Names appropriated and slandered. Nothing on there is new to her but the timing and composition of this latest mess Jack is making. Never could keep his fingers off a scab.

She strolls through the room and then turns when he hears him re-enter. The light makes him look as if cut from tracing paper, and the look of his face, too, the worried set of his jaw and the timidity of is posture --christ, he looks like he could be blown over just as easily, too.

He remains paused at the threshold, watching her skirt the room. Fists tensed vaguely at his sides, but making no move to intercept or stop her. “Is there something wrong?” She hears him ask.

Ana can barely answer. There’s been something wrong this last fifteen years, but she has learned to live with it, hasn’t she? Even beyond that, the slide that’s open, and the stack of papers on the table about different crises or Overwatch’s muddled name or even just Jack himself (‘fit to lead?’), Ana knows that there is something else wrong indeed. Something disturbing to her.

But what she says is, “I don’t know.” Quietly. Quiet as she always is, with him. But a softer voice takes longer hearing and she is still waiting for older words to reach him. “What are you doing, in here?”

He comes closer, then, self-consciousness seeming to strike enough that he tries to put his body between her and the stack of newspapers, disguising it as some attempt at desiring closeness. “I was just--” Jack swallows, “--just doing some thinking.” A hand scratches at his neck. Ana can smell him. Winter has never come closer to Ana than this, really --the impression or suggestion of it.

But, then, it never really snows back home for her.

She turns back towards his bed, where there’s a cigarette burning in the ashtray besides it. The current source of the smoke in the air, when she sees another set of papers. Physical copies of something are unusual. It looks like a form, and as she draws closer, aware of the way Jack’s gaze needles into her, she finally realises what it is, and thusly, why a hard copy is necessary.
A resignation form. With a few details filled in, too. Not much missing aside from the signature. Jack’s signature.

She turns on him, then. Breathless in the shock of it. At a loss. Her voice is reedy, and unsure, “Jack-”

“I know.” He says. Says it immediately, with a wisdom he hadn’t really earned, or one he has yet to prove to her, coming closer. Vulnerable. Human. There’s a drive in the both of them that Ana feels she takes as some sacrament: the desire to protect, omega that he is, and friend. “I just --I don’t know what--...” His head dips. Then he is standing before her. “I don’t know what to do.”

And he looks so lost, as if taken in by some blizzard, turned around and blinded, seeing nothing on his horizon that he can walk towards for shelter. Ana aches to hold him.

And she hates him for that.

“You want to leave.” She says --not a question. A statement to be contradicted or else left. She’s trying to give him the path of least resistance here. God knows he doesn’t need another war, and god knows she’s only after an answer. But the indecision in his eyes is visible, especially given how close they are: inches, at most, separate his tender form from hers.

Jack whispers, “I could.”

It’s easily said. Non-committal, but easy. He has assets. And out there, wherever he decides to settle, if he goes, he’d have more than enough. There’d be no more public statements. No more world on his shoulders. He could move on from this mess. Could try to start over. Something to that effect -- some pipe dream. Something that isn’t fully formed, because if it was, Jack would know he could never leave here without hurting everyone that has helped to make him.

Emotional, then, taking a step forward as if afraid he’ll just disappear, Ana murmurs, “You could stay.”

And Jack laughs, helplessly. “I could.” He looks away then, as if he can’t stand the guilt of saying it and looking at her, but it only draws his attention back to the far wall, and the slide of Gabriel, so he relegates his gaze to the floor, pitifully.

Ana takes one of his hands, brazenly. “Jack,” she murmurs, kindly. “Jack, what would we do without you?”

He makes another noise of laughter. This one is joyless. When his gaze lifts to her, his eyes are glistening with agony. “You’ve managed just fine the last few days.” He says, pathetically, trying some watery smile. “Besides,” He sniffs, “you and I both know who really runs this place.”

Ana tries to laugh, too, but can find nothing. No joy or easygoingness, but this hideous tightness in her chest. That this isn’t fixable. She can’t just wrench him out of the tub again. Can’t sit outside beneath the stars until the feeling passes. Maybe this is the final thing, and the inevitability of it is that she’ll have to let go, either way, willing or unwilling. But Ana has never been one to go so easily along with the feeling of fate.

Her hand tightens around his. “Stay.” she says. Her voice has grown in conviction. “You owe me that much.”
Jack shakes his head. Goes to pull away from her with this real gentleness. One that doesn’t make his actions uncertain. “For how long?” His head shakes. “I thought I’d be gone by the time I was thirty-five. Thought I thought I’d find some reason to leave.” He swallows, and looks away. “Think I found one.”

It’s haunting. To look at him like that and hear those words. Ones that have no business in his mouth, after all these years --after the worst part is over. Ana always admired that about him, in a way. How determined he was. To stay in the game. To win. Never thought he’d be the kind to start a fire just to let it burn out.

“Jack.” She says, again, her only resort. He shakes his head again.

“Aa, please.” He says, softly. “It’s --it’s five weeks notice. You’d have time to sort it out. And you’d --jesus, you’d do this better than me.” When he lifts his head again he looks utterly hopeless. His hand moves to her shoulder. Ana wishes she could anchor them both to this spot and not move until this is resolved. “I just --I can’t do it, anymore. I-I need-...”

*Time*, he was going to say.

*Time* --before his hand migrates from her shoulder to the side of her face, and then something in Jack’s eyes change. His gaze changes like he’s looking at her, and the room, and the world, somehow differently, now. His feet move. Shuffle closer, and then there’s nought but an inch between them --maybe more or less, and Ana is benefit to his full scent: the whisper of frost, and the northern pine of him, utterly seductive, and just as she can recall and imagine.

Her mouth opens to say something. Anything.

But Jack takes it with his, instead.
Jack thinks that it should be difficult. Wishes for that: for it to be impossible. Unthinkable. Unbearable.

Thinks there should be some great difficulty to infidelity -- even the merest act, but Ana is tender, and soft, and familiar. And then she is reciprocating and they are kissing in earnest and all that Jack can hear is the sudden blood thrumming between his ears and all he can take in is the waxy scent of citronella and all that he can begin to think is how easy it is. Easy, and thoughtless and irrational and quick.

Was it that way for Gabe? Did it just happen?

Jack can feel a set of fingertips tracing the front of his chest, not bold enough to touch, but longing to more than anything. He wants them to. Wants to be here, in this room, with Ana with him. Wants to see if he can do this.

All he can sense are the differences. Seventeen years with Gabe -- seventeen, only to be made a fool of, and to have his way of life mocked, but it’s what he’s used to. The scent of ash. Decisive hands, all action and yet patient. Broadness, equal strength and size: not this. Ana is smaller, her hands hesitate, her scent of citrus is sweet and comforting, tells of hot nights under warm, black skies, and she kisses just like seventeen years feels like; full of longing and lust and loss.

Her hesitance comes to a head suddenly. The fingertips on his chest become the flat of a palm, not forcing him back, but holding him where he is as her head turns. She is breathless. And, for the first time, the center of his solar system as he knows it, even for a second.

Terrified to lose his nerve, he hears himself ask, “Ana--”

“Don’t--” She breathes -- sounding small. Lost. Nervous, even, though he is the safest company she could keep. One of her hands comes to cover over her mouth. Her eyes glisten: teary but resolute.

“Jack, this -- this isn’t--...”

Isn’t what? Fair to her? Right? Anything more than some test of strength? This isn’t any of those things, but Ana is sharp enough to know that. She has the freedom to walk. To refuse this -- to hate him for the last ten seconds. Jack knows that. Hell, he anticipates it. So why is she still standing here, in his space, looking at him with such utter conflict in her eyes?
This isn’t-- “I know.” He says to her, honest with them both. Bare with it. There’s nothing else to lose but her, and maybe he wants to know. Not just to find the edge of his own limit, but to know her in every private way that his curiosity has never asked about. “You can --you can go. I just need--...” Jack’s head turns. He takes a sharp breath in. “I need to kno--”

Ana is quick to silence him. Impulsive, for once. Spontaneous, somehow, even at a time like this. She kisses so differently: tender in some reverent way, small but not without power.

How many plans has she made tonight alone? Schemes of work, counterintelligence solutions, frameworks for expansions that will span three years into the future. When was the last time she allowed herself unseen consequences? When was the last time Jack looked at her like this; desperate, and single-minded, but the colour of some communion wafer in the midlight?

Jack is reciprocal as water. Her hand anchors to his shoulder, with a clear intention to remain there. They part; Ana is breathless still, her face flushed, her voice a whisper in the reeds. “Ask me to leave.” Some plea. Something she means deeply.

Too alike, they are. To determined to remain. Immovable objects that are separate but parallel. Ana knows her heart. Knows she’ll stay, regardless of what happens when the sun rises tomorrow, just like Jack will stay here until the bloody and bitter inevitable sort of end there’s destined to be. Both should have left a long time ago. Both remain.

Jack shakes his head, ‘no’. Ana’s hand tightens, seeking the door in the obscure vision of the room in her mind, but seduced by his winter. Never having been so close before. “Jack.” She says, the name that sounds like her pulse. “Please --ask me--”

His hand is aft the side of her face. Holding her, there, with intimacy and tenderness meant for another. But Ana can pretend. Tries to, even, when he brushes some long strand of hair away from her face and she wonders if he’s had some way to see into her dreams to know exactly what to do. His thumb brushes her neck in the barest touch. There’s an apology in his eyes. In his face.

On his tongue.

“How don’t take this as rejection.” He says, then. Still holding her as he speaks.

Ana blinks, heavily, one eye premature of the other. Even now, she knows exactly what he means. How he feels. What he’ll do next.

 Somehow, she finds a laugh within her, airless. Strange. “I really don’t.”

And that really is the least of it.

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In and out of the infirmary is no way to be.

But Gabe can’t change his bandages with only one good arm, and even with both, he never does it how medical seem to like. All the easier, he thinks, to head down and have it done for him. All the easier, he thinks, to catch Jesse. Athena has him recorded as nearby, in one of the communal recreation spaces, and Gabe can’t deny it’s a factor in his venturing out of him room so late.
Everything hurts: his breaths in and out from within the bruised confines of his chest, and the finger-marks of Jack’s betrayal on his neck. The contusions on his face. The arm he won’t have good use with until next week. Internally is not much different. Ana had been at least easy on him, though not kind or gentle in any measure. Blackwatch’s operations, now out of his hands, only sit at the top of the pile of things that trouble him so deeply. And things he can do nothing about.

It’s over, isn’t it? That’s what he could read from Ana. From how his every system privilege has been revoked. No longer enjoying the nepotism of being mated, but instead being shut out of every official document and left in some tailspin of ignorance. His intel is cut off. He can do nothing for his company men. Doesn’t even know if he can do anything for Jesse.

The kid never asks, though. Never would, probably. Would rather lose his own hand than ask for one.

That’s a whole other mess to clean up, too. Jesse. Their future. If there is a ‘they’. Or a future.

Gabe has never thought to picture anything else beyond some remnant of idealism he once borrowed from Jack. They’d both decided that, in the shaky days of the crisis’ decline, and even in the early days of Jack’s own new autocracy, they were aiming for the same thing. Early retirement. Quiet days, large windows, open spaces. The place was never important—Jack used to joke about maps and dartboards, it mattered so little. But children; well, Jack had always been some strange thing from the very beginning. Knew his future before he knew himself, and it always involved his own family.

At the very beginning, in the midst of the war, and of the misery of the program? Gabe had hated it. Had hated him for it. The very suggestion. Didn’t understand that it was Jack’s version of existential realization. Never was resigned to dying, like Gabe was (for a minute there). The audacious little midwestern kid who was sat there with a plan for the rest of his life. Refusing to die. Unwilling to entertain the possibility.

Gabe can’t deny that there’s a lot about Jack that’s still as infectious. That had certainly been one thing. What course of resistance could Gabe’ve had, when they knew the tide of the crisis was turning, and when Jack would sit there with Fareeha, still tiny and newborn, in his lap, bouncing her idly, settling her with the same hand he used to fire his service pistol?

None. Hook, line and sinker: he wanted to be on that ride with Jack.

But Jesse?

Somehow, the kid has more rebellion that even Jack did. Surrounded by vast desert and all sides, but still flourishing and vital. Blunted by so many cruel hands, but still sharp as anything. Smart, too, far smarter than is good for him. Atypical and rare: with all the elements that have weathered him and all the makings of something Gabe has seen turn good men to the worst.

Jesse is a lot of things: a singularity of a kid. But Gabe’s future?

Maybe Gabe has just been around Jack too long, after all. That he’s finally picked up that resistant naivety, in the wake of all of this, and on some level genuinely believes in what they used to talk about. Like he doesn’t know Jack couldn’t carry. Could die trying, with the level of immunosuppression he’d need. Like he doesn’t know that their military service, and all of his years of pills wouldn’t cut the idea of adopting off at the root.
What then, if it’s only the two of them? Jack is too stubborn to leave here. The two of them, in some big, open house somewhere --christ, that’d be pathetic. Too many empty rooms. Sustained silences. Gabe’s never cared for either of those things. They force him to run into himself, and he’s never much liked what he’s found.

He’s stubborn, too. Knows he’s got to give this idea up. If he got himself off of codeine, then he can get himself off this, too.

Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, though. He’s itching for a pill when the medical intern he’s with finishes up. One of the older ones, who is experienced enough not to let Gabe talk his way into the dispensary. It isn’t worth the asking. He’ll smoke outside instead. Make a plan. Read a book. Distract himself.

It takes all of about half an hour. Then Gabe is free to go – asks for no help with his shirt, struggles through it one-handedly and puts his sling back in place silently. He isn’t even thinking when he’s using the access panel to check that Jesse’s still where he was last. Like the drive is at the back of his brain somewhere, just below the occipital lobe: to see the kid, at least. Check in with him.

Zurich is about as far from Mexico as it gets. Jesse’s owed some guidance, at least.

Still in the east wing. A communal rec room that’s on the same floor. Luck. Providence. Gabe doesn’t know. The kid probably just came from medical and is screwing around with one of the holograms installed, dazzled by the now-old technology. Or maybe it’s the toaster. He can’t say from here.

Either way, the walk is short. He doesn’t have to pass by Ana’s office, or Jack’s, or any residential suites. All of the building looks the same, and in a way, that’s kind. He can assign no memories to this specific bit of hallway or the way the lights remain constant and flickerless. The pain is fresh. A few cleaning bots on night mode mill about. He steps past them wordlessly.

The room itself is easy enough to find, despite the distinct featurelessness of this part of the building. The door, as with all communal recreation rooms, is open all the way, revealing a portion of counter from the kitchenette area, and the back of a couch, with another perpendicular to it. Gabe takes two steps inside, tall enough to see just over the first couch, navy, and a coffee table between the two. There’s a mounted slide projected in the centre of it. A long game table at the back, that can simulate pool, ping-pong and a few other games. Very popular with the orderlies.

But no Jesse that he can see.

Gabe comes further inside the room to take stock of it. The kitchenette shows signs of life --indeed, the toaster, dirtied with crumbs. A few cups collecting by the sink that haven’t yet been put into the washer. The microwave is largely undisturbed, blinking back the hour in red LED and he looks over it so quickly that for a second he thinks it says ‘no vac’.

Confused, and at a new loss, he wanders into the middle of the room, by the coffee table, and that’s where he finds his boy. Asleep, of all things. At rest on the largest loveseat. It’s probably the most arresting things Gabe has seen in years.

The kid is still wearing the damn hoodie, for a start. He’s on his side, turned out towards the table, curled small with his knees drawn into his chest. His face is half-flat against a pillow, mouth open ever-so-slightly. Enough so that his breathing is just about audible, soft and even. His hair is over
his eyes. Christ, he looks so peaceful. Gabe feels intrusive even to spectate. But he can’t find it in him to look much away, either.

At the foot of the loveseat is a clear plate with a few spare crumbs on and around it, and on top of that, an open jar of peanut butter with a knife still sticking out of it. The plastic of the jar is clear and Gabe can see through parts of it. Early empty. He’d been wondering what it is the kid eats, besides peaches, if anything at all. But from the looks of the knife, and the crumbs that have also settled into the creases of the hoodie, he thinks he might have his answer.

There’s space at the end of the chair to sit down. Gabe takes it, gratefully. Looks over the kid and feels somehow calmer, already. Maybe it’s the benefit of Jesse’s scent soaked into the fabric of the chair, and of the hoodie, mixing with his. Pleasing on some basic, esoteric level.

It’s only then he realises that this is the first time he’s seen Jesse asleep. And not drifting between consciousness and death by overdose. There’s no blood this time. No unholy sweat or tremors. No hand on Jesse’s wrist to monitor his heart rate as cycles of the sun pass out some dingy window.

Maybe they’re not in Mexico. Maybe this is all a bloody mess, indeed; but Gabe can call it progress, at least.

With the only hand he can use, Gabe traces gently up the outside of the kid’s leg and settles it on his hip. Leaves it there, so they’re just touching, that’s all. The gesture feels something like physical protection. Gabe doesn’t even realise it’s that easy to be drawn in. Doesn’t realise until weeks later that less than a minute near the kid he’s already nesting with him.

Maybe that’s just because he doesn’t get a chance —a few more minutes pass, and Gabe’s touch turns to some gentle tracing. Heavy enough to rouse the kid, and then Jesse’s legs are shifting and one of his hands is coming to his eyes, sheepishly, as they open ever-so-slightly.

He turns slightly onto his back. Gabe coughs, lightly. “Didn’t mean to wake you.” He says, quietly.

Jesse blinks at him, impassively. Dim from grogginess. He speaks through a yawn. “Gabriel?” The kid seems to brighten slightly on speaking, shifts back so that he’s sat against the arm of the chair, letting his legs draw out again a little, pushing his wayward fringe out of his face with the heel of his hand, before wiping down his mouth. “You s’posed t’be up an’ about?”

The words are muffled in his sleeve. Gabe has to take a second to decipher them, but manages to, with a smile. “I’ll be fine.” He murmurs, mildly, watching Jesse push another strand of his out of his eyes. “You could use a haircut, kid.”

Face clear, Jesse looks up at him with this sort of coyote smile out of the side of his mouth. Unfairly handsome as it is, lucid and cool. Maybe it’s just because he looks better: colour in his face, the high of his cheeks and jaw no longer sharp. Gabe can no longer cut his hands on Jesse’s edges. He’s glad about it.

“You’re right on that.” the kid says, through a stretch, leaning back over the arm to extend his arms above his head. It lifts the oversized jacket he’s wearing in the process, and Gabe is helpless but to see a few inches where the top the kid’s pants start and the jacket stops: revealing the dusky, softer-looking skin of Jesse’s stomach. The conscious, visual reminder has Gabe look away momentarily. Feels once again intrusive.

He knows this needs to be resolved, That it’ll hang over his head until he finds out what the kid plans
to do. But the anticipation of relief is at odds with his cowardice, here. So he doesn’t say anything just yet, and just nods.

It’s over in a second anyway, and then the kid is rubbing one of his eyes again, sitting up a little better. Looking over Gabe’s form with this sort of fondness, or --or is it relief? Whatever the case, Gabe isn’t used to it. Hardly knows how to be under it. So he says, “so you got into the peanut butter.” Just as a way to say something.

The kid snorts a little laugh. “Sure did.” He says. “Lady I saw earlier got all on my case about eatin’. Figured t’take her advice.” One of Jesse’s hands moves from to the jar he’s left open on the floor, and he brings the dirty knife up to his face to lick it, appreciatively, before it extending it towards Gabe. “Y’want some?”

Gabe leans back only nominally. Caught on Jesse’s words more than the gesture. “No, thanks.” He says, shaking his head. Waiting on the exact second that Jesse surrenders the knife again before he dares to ask. “Lady from earlier?”

Jesse lifts his head a bit at the words, drawing the now-clean knife out of his mouth. The gesture is somehow nervous: in the way the kid deposits the knife back into the jar slowly, looking off as he does. Maybe he's just considering what to say. It’d be a first. “The lady who was lookin’ over me for the, uh --the pelvic exam.” he says, clumsily. “Thought Miss Amari woulda told’ja.”

It’s said with clumsy defensiveness. Like Jesse can’t think to be embarrassed or guarded about it. God, Gabe wouldn’t even be able to tell him that much.

The words themselves force the thought of Jack back into his head --his own exams and appointments that Gabe had been shut out of. Preliminarily, though: kept at arm’s length for the sake of the both of them. He’d never been. Hardly knows what one might entail. All he can think of is hands on his boy in this way that lights up something aggressive in the back of his brain. Jesse on his back. Open. Black and white pictures that sting in concept like an old, aching scar.

The kid seems reminded by saying it, sitting up all the straighter to dig his hand into one of the hoodie pockets at the front. Gabe knows what it will be even before it happens. Is hurt before the shot is fired, and then Jesse’s arm is stretched out as if to give him something. Presenting him with a physical picture; crumpled paper, monochrome. The back is mercifully plain. Nothing is given away.

“Thought y’might wanna see this,” The kid murmurs, childishly. Looking away with great purpose. “Or --or, I don’t know.”

The way he looks there: so utterly hopeless, with his arm outstretched, adrift and unreachable, trying to anchor to Gabe? It leaves him no other strategy but to take the damn picture. Is hurt before the shot is fired, and then Jesse’s arm is stretched out as if to give him something. Presenting him with a physical picture; crumpled paper, monochrome. The back is mercifully plain. Nothing is given away.

“ Thought y’might wanna see this,” The kid murmurs, childishly. Looking away with great purpose. “Or --or, I don’t know.”

The way he looks there: so utterly hopeless, with his arm outstretched, adrift and unreachable, trying to anchor to Gabe? It leaves him no other strategy but to take the damn picture. If only out of curiosity. If only --christ, if only to try to remember the excitement he’d felt, all those months ago. That giddy, warm, helium-balloon sensation that it was real and it was happening and Jack--....

Gabe’s mouth is ash when he takes the piece of paper, between a thumb and forefinger. Drawing it towards himself. Turning it face-up hesitantly, unable to face or bear the misery of what it will contain. All of the world’s worth, and none, all at once, contained in these obtuse, abstract lines that curve into the shape of life itself. Some sweet obliviousness contained in the outlined form of a baby.

He swallows. His thumb, by some traitorous and half-aborted motion, traces the sweep of the infant’s
spine as he speaks. “Jesse--”

The kid is already halfway off the chair by now. The kid’s eyes as disturbed as the earth around a robbed grave. “We don’t hafta talk about it.” He says, quickly. Strained with fear at what Gabe might say. “I-I mean, we don’t hafta talk about it now.”

Jesse is stood before him with wringing hands in the dark of this nameless recreation room. Practically kneeling and begging answers from Gabe, who is at the same crossroads, and the same loss. Only, he’s sat, ruined with pain and in no circumstance to be calling any shots.

They have to settle this, he knows. But that’s just about all he knows, if he’s honest.

There’s a pathetic sort of silence. Gabe is the one to break it. Swallowing. Speaking faintly. “What do you want to do?”

Jesse’s head snaps up. “What?”

There’s clear panic in his eyes. The shine of the headlight he’s clearly caught in. But they’re both caught in it, and this conversation has been long overdue. Gabe has nothing for Jesse. He doesn’t have the answer. He tries to make that as clear as possible, folding his hands. Giving the kid his soberest look. “This is your shot to call, kid.”

“So what?” the kid chirps again, almost angrily. His hands don’t know where they want to be, making at fists but coming out in front, full of nervous, accusational energy. “It’s -- it’s your shot, too, ain’t it?” Jesse looks fully at him. Utterly lost. Trying to make sense of it. “Y’were the one the brought me here.” He says, sharply. “The one that -- that got me this way--”

Pathetic -- trying to slip the noose, Gabe pipes up, “You said Johnny--”

So much the worse: Jesse throws his hands up and barks. “Johnny’s dead!” His face has gone from owlish to ugly with a familiar sort of temper. Gabe saw it before in that interrogation room: faceful of the kid’s fist and errant fury to show for it. “He aint about to step in and have his say, so now you gotta.”

This time, though -- maybe it’s the picture, or the fluctuation of hormones (the ones that had made even Jack tender) or something else entirely, but Jesse’s righteous anger seems to fade. Dissolves, like salt in the ocean, and then the kid just looks empty again. Hands lax. Voice soft. Pleading. “Tell me -- tell me what t’do, Gabriel.” He almost whispers. Far more gently than a boy like that should have the skill to manage. Imploring. “Do that for me.”

Gabe looks up at where the kid stands. Then away, with some shrug. Too easy for the demands of the circumstance. “I can’t.” He says, and just in time to see Jesse’s mouth open in some smart little retort, he cuts in. “I can tell you what I want, and i can tell you what you wanna hear.” He says, plainly. “But I can’t tell you what to do.”

The denial of the situation has clearly already passed. Jesse’s got that stage of this misery down, and he’s through anger and right into bargaining. Textbook in its structure, but inimitable in its candor. “Then what d’you want?” Jesse asks him. Hollow from the inside out. Still standing there and wringing his hands. Speaking in a small voice, unassuming, but speak only in assumptions “Y’got that mark on your neck.” He murmurs. “Y’must’ve at least thought about babies before.” The kid swallows. “But I -- I guess, if you don’t have none, that’d mean you don’t want none--”
Gabe sighs. “It’s not about what I want.”

Mistake. The kid turns on him, exasperated. “Quit your goddamn moralisin’.” Jesse says, in a sharp, high voice. “Just -- just give me a damn answer.”

Gabe feels conscious of the mating mark. Thinks about Jack’s. About stiff white bandage. Feels like he’s been cut through the chest. “Yes. I -- I’ve thought about raising kids.” He hears himself say. “Did a lot of thinking about it.” Hasn’t said it out loud in years. Never to anybody but Jack. “Thought about it -- jesus, for a long fucking time”

He recalls conversations that seem to have spanned years: the first, tentative suggestion, from Jack, and not him, and then from the both of them. The whole concept of it is so tied to Jack, though. Doesn’t feel real outside of him. Doesn’t feel real coming from Jess, somehow. Even now, with that picture, and the richness of his scent and the ever-so-slight swell of the kid’s belly. Jesse feels divorced from wider reality. Cut from an old newspaper. The kind of boy that doesn’t have children, and could never possibly have been anybody’s child.

But he’s still standing there, waiting on something more from Gabriel. Ignorant to Jack, and to the child they lost. Trying to lean on a falling man. He has to say something. Wants to be open, for once. “It’s -- it’s not like this.” He mutters. “We planned, and we tried, and - - look, what I want is irrelevant. This is about you.” He waves a brusque hand. “You’re not even twenty. You’re just a kid--”

That has Jesse bristling sharply, arms folding across his chest. “Old enough.”

Gabe shakes his head. “You are not ready for--”

“For what?” The kid huffs a laugh through his nose, before gesturing nastily to the picture Gabe is still inexplicably holding. “This?” His eyes narrow, then, like he’s finally realising all of the cruelty of the world he’s been inhabiting. “Why don’t you ask any of those deadlock boys how ready I was? Or -- or Miss Marie?” He shakes his head again. “An’ since when was it your place to decide what i am rea--”

“Because nobody else ever has.”

Five words, and the electricity dies in the kid. The wind is abducted from Jesse’s sails and his mouth shuts. Slack. This cold, vulnerable sort of look overtaking his eyes. Ashamed that it’s so obvious. That his deprivation is so relative and so severe, all at once. That he’s clinging to a man who should well be a stranger. Nobody ever has looked out for the kid before.

Nobody ever thought to.

Defeated, then, swallowing something back, Jesse sets his jaw hard and grits out, “I don’t need you to look after me.”

Gabe says, “I know.” almost immediately. Because they’re standing barely three feet away from each other and Gabe still feels as if he can do nothing for the boy. Because nobody can seem to.

It seems to be a constant in Jesse’s life. He looks about as tired as he always does, which is to say not much, given his circumstances. The only indication of it is that he sits, then, coming to perch shakily back onto the couch. His left knee bounces. Resignation hasn’t wrenched that nervous, live-wire energy about him. Or maybe it’s just that they make lousy enemies. Gabe can hold nothing against
Jesse, really. He can’t even hold him.

“I just—...” Gabe’s voice sounds harsh to his own ears. He tries to often himself. “I don’t want you to do what you think will make me happy. Or --or make somebody else happy.” It’s the only advice Gabe has to offer. Comes from years of planning. Of watching Ana, and Fareeha, and Jack. He has to give the kid something. “This is a child we’re talking about. Not a bargaining chip.”

That seems to sink in. Or maybe Jesse just doesn’t have a witticism ready for the occasion. Left to stare down at his feet helplessly. Gabe lets him. Thinks, for all that he wants to help the kid to shoulder this, it ultimately isn’t his battle. And the silence, however painful, and tense, is some sort of indication that Jesse’s thinking it over.

It lasts for a few minutes, at least. Silence isn’t Jesse’s natural habitat and eventually he lifts his chin from out of his palm and murmurs, “What happened to ‘em?”

“Mm?” Gabe looks at him, woodenly

The kid’s eyes migrate to his neck. A heat of something that doesn’t pare play at jealous but isn’t so far off. A curiosity that is both naive and iconoclastic all at once. “Th’ one that gave y’that mark.” Jesse says, smartly. Almost sadly. “Never did get an answer.”

Gabe looks away from him. The kid finds the wound, even from his place in the dark, and picks open the fresh scabbing there. The question feels evasive but the kid is right on the money. He has a right to know about Jack, in some capacity. “How come y’aint got a whole litter a’ pups, if that’s what y’wanted? He gone?”

But it’s so crudely put that gabe thinks he could hardly manage it. So childish, not just in the words but in the assumptions there. Like it was just one person or just one event that has come to define the void, in the same way that the kid thinks that Gabe’s one impulsive moment --in that bed, on that night, has come to define and encompass him in all the eyes that watch him.

He doesn’t want to get into it: too many years to unpack.

So he doesn’t.

Instead, he shrugs, “Something like that.” Plays it comfortably vague. Jesse looks hardly impressed by it, and for perhaps the first time, it gets to Gabe. Crawls under his skin. He’s tired of this aloofness. Thinks, maybe, it would be terribly brave not only to be honest with the kid, and with himself about this pain.

He loves Jack so ardently. Loves every imagined iteration of their children. Loves the picture buried in Jack’s bedside drawer. He never did know how to mourn.

After another moment, he inhales shakily. “I don’t know the technical term for what it is.” His head shakes. “I --I still don’t know. I only found out after --after a long time trying.” The memory is still sharp, and every word a necessary dagger. “But he --he can’t--” Gabe swallows, proudly. “It didn’t happen.”

The words and concepts are presented without owners. Nobody’s fault. That’s the most important part of the telling.

The kid’s chin sinks back into his palm again, as if in understanding. “Guess I complicate the
narrative a bit.” He huffs.  

Gabe nods to the kid. Offers no opposition when the kid reaches out and takes the picture back, reverent in his small hands, as if it were living itself, and not some mere representation. It looks too much like Jack’s sonogram: a copycat piece of art. An imitation. The white of a celestial body, or the same pallor of white sheets in dark rooms. He remembers the name ‘Ezekiel’.  

Those thoughts are of no concern to Jesse, who startles him in the asking, “Is it --s’it different, since we aint bonded?” The kid asks. “Jus’ sounded like --like you really wanted it.” There’s some kind of longing in the sentiment, maybe, but it’s secondary to the words themselves. Secondary to the life growing in the kid’s belly.  

Gabe tries to cut through it, to the heart of the matter. “I’m not about to ask you to stay pregnant.” It’s said with great pause. This isn’t about him. The kid needs to be making the most informed decision he can.  

Surely informed, Jesse takes a sharp breath in. “So you want I should get m’self fixed, then?” He looks up at Gabe. “S’that right?”  

The words are harsh. He feels as if he hasn’t stayed his hand enough. “I didn’t say that.” He says, weakly, but even if the kid hears it, it appears as no concern to him. Jesse shuffles backwards on the chair. Looks over at some bleak corner of the room. It still, and quiet, if only for a second.  

Then he mumbles, “Had it done once before, y’know.” Softening, now, in his honesty. His head cants a little. His hands come together again, candor looking good on him in the way a tragedy is romantic. “Didn’t, uh --didn’t much like it.” His mouth quirks. Like he’s swallowing something. Holding back.  

Gabe recognises the action, even as the words settle in and he makes terrible sense of them. Then he’s shifting towards Jesse on the couch, if only to be some kind of physical support. If only because he can’t reach backwards into time, and right here and now, it’s all he can do as an apology for Jesse’s terror. He didn’t know. He couldn’t have.  

He tries to speak gently. “Why --why didn’t you tell me?” But it makes his affection visible. Maybe that’s what frightens Jesse.  

The kid waves him off. “It ain’t important.” He says --full bravado. All defense. Said with the same front and grit Gabe has worn for Jack so many times. It’s heavy to wear, and to wield. “But --but it happened.” There’s a flaw in his composure. Something gives. He shrinks under the weight of it. Looking away. “Y’said this is about what I want. An’ --an’ I don’t wanna do it again.”  

Gabe doesn’t know the full story: his melancholy only half of would it would be, if he did know -- and still something so awful that he finds himself coming towards the kid before he can help it. Reaching out to touch the handsome plane of Jesse’s face, only to have the kid cough out angrily and look away.  

His hand migrates to the kid’s chin, his thumb stroking along the jaw there softly. “Jesse--”  

“Don’t.” The kid warns him. “Don’t .This ain’t about that.” He turns his head towards Gabe, then, his eyes not bright or brimmed with tears, but glazed as if bored of his own hurt. He leans in towards Gabe, at least, seeking comfort. Leading with his nose towards the alpha, seeking Gabe’s scent as
something pleasant to cling to, satisfying his nesting instinct if only to bear the anxiety.

Gabe merely pretends to be so unaffected. Holds the kid there. Let’s him get the better of himself.

Jesse takes his time before speaking again. Trying to get his words together, or his ducks in a row, or something. “Miss Amari said that I could --could find somebody t’take the baby, maybe.” He says, awkwardly. There’s little conviction in it, like he’s talking himself into it. “Somebody who’d do a good job.”

There’s an undercurrent in that. Gabe hasn’t reviewed Jesse’s public records enough to know the story of any familiar monsters: let alone the kid’s own mother. But if he did, he’d find a mirror of tragedy: of drugs, and hustling. Of a child surrendered to the state at age seven, penniless, nameless, malnourished. Throw into worse families during the worst of the wartime.

But Jesse remembers at least some of it. Enough not to trust blindly. Enough not to trust himself.

Gabe is hardly thinking of it deeply. Not even of Jack, in the way Ana had been. His thoughts are much simpler. “Is that what you want?”

The kid looks off, distantly. “Think it’s the best thing t’do.”

Gabe is on heels with a hard and serious voice. “That isn’t what I asked you.”

Then the kid is turning his face back towards Gabe, and there’s some reluctant smile there. Fondness, despite it all. That what he feels returns him to Gabe somehow is a mercy, here and now, when the alpha can move forward again and use his unslung arm to embrace the kid. Bringing him under his arm, close enough to scent him more distinctly, but leaving the warm, blooming pain of his ribs unexacerbated.

Maybe Jesse doesn’t realise he has an answer to give. Or maybe he doesn’t have one. They’d just be talking in circles, anyway. Best to let it lie for now. God knows the last few days have been hell for them both, in different ways.

Gabe thinks maybe the kid is just going to leave it, having had enough of this terseness and uncertainty. But he’s surprised to hear the kid murmur, “You’d be a good father, I bet.” Something Gabe had said before, all those months ago, to Jack. Something he’s thought to himself before. Never thought he’d hear it with such sentimentality out of Jesse’s mouth. “Kids deserve parents like that.” He goes on. “Somebody that can do somethin’ for em.”

The revelation occurs then --as it had to Ana, but only just then to Gabriel. He thinks of clemency in it’s purest form. Of goodness and the giving of life, and it’s Jack, eclipsing every and all image he can conjure. It’s Jack.

Thoughtless, then, but trying to be of comfort, he hears himself say, “There’s lots of people like that.” But he only really means one.

Ignorant to this, blissfully so, Jesse hums through a yawn. “I hope so.” He says, quietly.

That is the most and least of it, really. All of the words Gabe has been dreading to say, and the ground he has been terrified to broach. Maybe it it’s over, in so many words. God knows they still have months of this --maybe even years, depending on Jesse’s definition of a good man. But they have a plan, at least, and one Gabe has few objections with.
His good sense is clear and well-seeming at it. That’s the part of him that doesn’t just light up at the merest notion of having Jesse close to him like this, with the urge to protect, and to nurture fulfilled. Whatever happens, happens, and he cannot well control or despise where they are, right now. Jesse: safe, no handcuffs or scratches on him, his scent warm and rich, fed, clothed. In good arms.

It’s partly a scapegoat, Gabe knows to himself --the safest place to put what he feels for Jesse while he figures out where he’s standing. Easier to call it instinct than anything else. God, this business is all up in the air as it is. What would it do to Jesse, and his choices, if Gabe was to make himself known? It’s merciful to be distant, now: to them all.

So, really, there’s nothing else to say, and Gabe contents himself to continue holding the kid, even as Jesse shifts backwards to get even closer to him, his nose turned towards Gabe’s collar, his eyes closing, tiredly. The weight against his chest is a quiet sort of agony given the injury there, but he allows it.

It’s nice --nicer than Gabe knows he has any right to.

But the night is quiet and cool. Nobody comes to disturb them, and after a few more minutes of sitting there, like that, stroking up the kid’s arm affectionately, he notices the deep even breaths and stillness that seem to indicate sleep. When he cranes his head to look down better, he can see Jesse’s mouth pressed, open, a hand making a loose hold is a fist in the fabric of Gabe’s shirt.

To see it is accidental, but God, it could kill a man. Could ruin Gabe if he lets it.

(And he does, for a few minutes, comfortable in the safety of the room’s solitude. He uses a finger to brush more of the kid’s hair from his face and presses his lips to Jesse’s temple, and then again, gently, lightly, to his brow. His other hand moves from the outside of Jesse’s arm and in, drawn towards the small swell of the kid’s stomach. Curious, but tenderly, too, careful not to do anything to wake the boy as he presses a palm to the swell.

The change is subtle in it’s distinction, though still present. For whatever jail had been for Jesse, the kid had gained a little weight in his stint there, but it’s very distinguishable from the almost-sweet bump that Gabe can feel. There’s no real fat or muscle mass to obscure it as there has been with Jack.

Gabe’s eyes watch Jesse’s face carefully for signs of waking before he moves his hand again, in a small and circular motion. Only --only for a few seconds, at most, before withdrawing back to take Jesse’s hand. His wrist, really. It feels like more familiar territory. )

It’s not about what Gabe wants.

He knows it when he wakes Jesse up, eventually, with a gentle shake, and the offer of his bed. Knows it as the kid smiles through a yawn, and the way his eyes go all unguarded and soft. As they stand, and then as Gabe leads the kid, to the elevator, and then from the east wing, and then to the north. Careful to take the longest way around, that doesn’t pass by marked doors or intimate rooms that now double as graveyards.

Jesse doesn’t even undress to climb into the bed. Takes off the hoodie, and then climbs under the sheets, saying nothing about the bare, anonymous room that Gabe has barely lived in. Saying nothing about how the sheets smell sterile and empty from years of vacancy. The kid is merciful enough just to sleep, asking no more questions, and speaking no more words, content to have the alpha at his side.
Gabe does not sleep; but lies there awake, watching the kid, even n the dark. Stuck on everything that has been said. Everything that’s happened, and happening --and is to come.

It’s not about what he wants, he knows.

No matter how much he realises he wants it.

- 

It’s hours later when the sun begins to dare in rising.

And Ana is sleepless, too.

She’s been in this room many times, but never, she realises at this hour. And never like this.

The sun is yolky through the venetian blinds. Turning the papers and the walls some rich, wildfire orange. Turning the room to some transitional ambiguity. Making Jack’s skin golden.

He is, at least, still resting. He sleeps in the same way she’s seen in his office, or on transport, when he’s really out of it: always turned to one side, mouth open, gentle breaths audible but sweet. Lightly, too, she knows, even as she turns to look at him carefully, noting the way the thin sheet is cast only over his hip. Noting the way one of his arms is still slung over her.

It’s a habit. Unconscious and insignificant. Jack is used to sleeping next to somebody: somebody who isn’t her.

The bandage on his neck is gone. Didn’t last the sight. Worried off. Scratched. Consciously removed --Ana doesn’t know, she doesn’t recall looking. Instead can only recall coming by. The look in his eyes. His proximity, and sweet, soft winter overtaking her every sense as he’s said ‘Don’t take this as rejection’.

An apology, in advance. An admission that no matter what happened, or didn’t happen, this was no genesis. Nothing would grow or evolve from the night.

Ana can live without clinging to sentiment. Can live with what’s happened, and how he’d kissed her, like finding a stranger’s face in the dark. How he’s put his powerful hands on her hips and manouvered her to the bed. Put his hand on her hand --her breast, her skin. Her cunt. Had been more gentle than she ever imagined, but firm, and present: fucked her cruel and tenderly all at once, and they came within minutes of eachother.

And he’s sleeping, still. Ana can’t think of anything but the sight of him. Can’t think of anything but the amazement than even as Jack had been inside of her, it had still been for Gabriel’s benefit. For his pain, and equity. She knew that, though. Has known it all along. That doesn’t make Jack’s arm over her any less present. Doesn’t make the sheets are less warm, or the mattress more uncomfortable, or the scent of Jack on her skin any the fainter.

It just means Jack is even with his mate, now. The last and best favour Ana could do for him.

And the most merciless thing Jack could ask of her.

She lies there awake because she knows that now the world has shift. This has given Jack something
back --power, or pride, or something. Enough that in a few hours, he’ll rise, and he’ll pull on his uniform and he’ll take back his calendar and Ana will slip quietly back onto the sidelines, watching tentatively, thankful and thankless all the same. She lies there awake because he might well be gone when she opens her eyes, and they both know she can’t come back here again.

So, for now, her eyes stay open, and she tries to memorise the sight of him before her. Every detail: the gold of his skin, the part of his lips. The way he’d felt with his hands on her, and then his lips on her, ephemeral but timeless to her. She tries to gather it all up, and hold on to it, to the best of her tired ability.

Ana knows her eyes will have to close, at some point. That she’ll have to get up, and leave this room, and she knows the moment she does she can never really return. God knows she wants to say. To have Jack rouse and then pull her tighter. To say something foolish like he finally knows what he wants, and for it to be her, for once. Wants him to kiss her again, and mean it.

Her eyes close after her gaze of Jack becomes a teary and wobbling image of grief. She resigns herself.

It doesn’t matter what she wants, she knows.

No matter how much Jack must know she wants it.
i’m acutely aware of how long this took. i’m also acutely aware that my (unpaid) weekdays are from 6am-6pm. It’s a hard old life.
be kind. say anything. it always helps.
this was made possible by the ever-fantastique jack, my own true love.

Jack wakes not long after sunrise.

And there is a second --maybe even a fraction of that, between his eyes closing and him seeing where he finds himself, that he hasn’t come around to remembering the night before, or recognising the scent in his sheets or feeling the smaller, softer body that his arm is slung over. There’s this second where the world hasn’t shifted yet; and it is blissful and easy and simple.

But it’s only a second. That’s the problem.

It passes almost instantly, and then Jack recognises the hot, waxy citronella of Ana’s scent at the same time he sees the back of her head. The way her long hair is at rest on one of the pillows, flowing down like the cut of a river seen from the sky. His wrist is laid over the smallest part of her waist, leaving his hand limp and hanging over the plane of her stomach.

Her form is unmoving. Familiar, to him, and yet so strange. There’s the scar of an old exit wound high on the blade of her left shoulder that he thinks he recognises the origin of: from where he’d seen her shot, point blank in the chest during the crisis. How she’d gasped out for air, clamping a hand down on it. The blood trickling through her fingers: she called for evac, and made a few more shots.

That didn’t kill her.

And this won’t, he knows. Intrepid woman as she is. Stubborn, maybe. Ana won’t die from anything like this --but Jack only has to take one look at her, at rest in his sheets, recalling the feeling of her, to think, m aybe she ought to .

Rather be defeated, and heal, than to survive and have it hurt.
Because, God, Jack knows all about the hurt of it. He doesn’t want that for her --for the loneliness and weight and inescapable gravity of it. The crying, alone, in the bath, or watching cycles of the sun on the wall for hours, unable to move or wrench oneself away.

But Jack did this to her. And what he wants has no importance here.

So the first thing Jack does is retract his hand. Moves it as impassively as he can, so as not to wake her, if she’s sleeping, or so as not to disturb her any more if she’s awake. He moves himself over to the edge of the bed, freeing himself from the sheets. Ignoring the exhaustion he’d otherwise deem as divine, or passionate. Every other time, it had been: but every other time had been with Gabe.

He wonders, then, standing in the weak light of the room, if it can be considered a crime of passion, if that passion is only one-sided. There’s a joke in there, somewhere.

But he leaves it be.

Ana’s form is unmoving on the bed. Her breaths are shallower than would indicate sleep. Maybe she is awake, and can hear him moving around as he dresses. Does she hate him, by now? Is that what the silence is? Resentment? Or maybe she is sleeping, still, holding onto the time she has left here. Maybe it’s his paranoia telling him anything otherwise: gone into overdrive at how he’s finding the world, now.

Shifted, as it has. Has he risen or stooped to Gabe’s level? Does it matter?

The uniform seems to help. Jack feels slightly less of himself when he’s about finished dressing. The ceremoniousness of it always did that to him. Sometimes he looks at him: the Strike Commander in all of his public statements and posters and wonders who he is. What it would take to break him. There’s nothing weak or human of his image. Jack has always been the opposite.

It’s his defense, then, to dress, fully, before he dares to perch on the edge of the bed again. To feel over the impression of where he’d slept, moving his hand towards the top of her arm. Warm, too, in sleep or stillness.

Stillness, he learns when she turns her head towards him almost immediately. There’s no haze or disorientation to her gaze. She looks as she always does, wise and hawkish with focus. Her body twists and then she’s sort of sitting up in the sheets at the point of his touch. He has all of her
Jack tries to think of something to say. Some way to apologise, and thank her, all at once, but he finds himself useless and is mouth dry and his brain empty. There isn’t a combination of words that will excuse him, or make it right.

So in the end, he doesn’t say anything. He drops his head, and they embrace.

She holds him with all of the bright, burning affection of a lover, yet the restraint and quiet dignity of one resigned. One of her arms holds him at his back, and the other cradles his head like she’s still trying to protect him. No bitterness or resentment in the gesture: nothing he knows he deserves.

She pulls away softly, scanning his face.

Jack doesn’t know how guarded to be. He could cry. He doesn’t know what he feels --least of all at the flicker of pain he can see in her. Was this worth it? Will her pain be ranked as equal measure with Gabriel’s, when he comes to know?

Her voice trembles slightly. She cuts his thoughts off at the root with her words. “Ask me to stay.” Is all she says.

Jack knows better than to question her, now. His head dips. He takes a weak breath in. “Stay.” He says. It’s the least he can do. “Please --please, stay.”

She gives him some breathless laugh. Her fingertips graze his cheek and she looks as if she’s really considering it. Extending her roots downwards and anchoring herself into the earth here, to grow and call this place home. Or maybe it’s just his performance she’s reacting to --his sweet sincerity when he asks her.

There’s the suggestion of a smile on her lip. Sharp and essential as the blade of a knife. “I can’t.” She says, then, drawing away from him.

It’s her decision, like that. Her shot to call. For once, she’s the one that gets to walk.
Jack grants her that largesse, at least. He waits, on the bed, watching as she dresses with no particular urgency. How she puts herself together again, tying her hair back. Tucking her shirt in. Fixing her face, and then when she turns back to face him, from the door, she looks as she always does. Like some magic trick: her face is neutral and her pain is mastered, and Jack is forced to wonder how much pain she is really hiding, not just from this but from the years that have spanned between them.

He hears himself say her name, just once. “Ana.”

The facade doesn’t break, somehow --but there are cracks in the veneer in the way her lips draw in like she’s reacting to something terrible sour. Something somehow worse and all the more poisonous than her name from his mouth.

But it’s just for a second. Just the shortest of seconds.

And then her expression is mastered again. Then her voice is steady as he says, “Don’t take this as rejection.”

There’s nothing else to be said. She walks. Leaves him there like that, with his own words used against him. Alone in the room where her scent still lingers. Where, years ago, mornings were the hardest of all in the sweet sorrow parting and now Jack thinks he would wake alone forever if he had the choice.

‘Don’t take this as rejection’, she’d said.

He really doesn’t.

-

The BLEAT results come through that morning.

They wake Gabe at some time after sunrise --a gentle alert that sounds at one side of him. The room is still dim --the standard curtains almost lilac with the light only just filtering through them. The walls are plain, and white and bare, making the room seem ever-so-slightly lighter than it really is. Bigger, too.
Gabe has never liked empty spaces: they scream of something missing.

He pretends that’s why he’s relieved that he isn’t alone in here. That it’s not because of something more familiar and intimate, to see the kid’s face pressed into one pillow, mouth open, hair askew, looking entirely at home. Comfortable.

It’s still a new thing to see the kid with clothes on. Let alone comfortable.

The noise doesn’t wake the kid, and so much the better. This sort of thing is supposed to be confidential, and Gabe is sure he’s the paragon of professionalism as he turns over in the bed to extend the slide and read the performance analysis. He’s seen some of the raw data, but none of the trends or a holistic breakdown. It’s sort of exciting, in a strange way --seeing Jesse’s name there. Safe in Blackwatch. Belonging.

He’s got no choice to be integrated, now. His suggested slot is between where Mercer had been, in Company C, or in a more active role in Company B. Gabe has anticipated something of note on marksmanship --but hadn’t expected the kid to be above the average for inductive reasoning, or nonverbal reasoning. His counterintelligence is sort of poor, but scores on that are rarely initially promising.

It’ll be months pass before Jesse could be cleared for active duty, anyway, even if he weren’t pregnant. But Gabe likes the idea of him taken out of the fray, on some distant rooftop, scoped and quiet and safe, far more than working rooms that Gabe won’t be in, in countries he doesn’t know with men he can’t trust. Reconnaissance and counterintelligence take the worst sort in: not the bad men, necessarily, but the ones who keep the bad men from the door.

And it’s not really killing, Gabe doesn’t think, if it’s from a distance. When you don’t feel the life leave them --a last, huffed-out breath, or pulses of blood leave them in too-great quantities, or even just the sudden and sharp silence on the other end of the comm line.

It’s not killing in the same way. Jesse will probably be able to keep sleeping, just as he is now, with Mercer’s blood all on his hands. He deserves that mercy, at least: after the life he’s had.

Gabe can’t assign him anything under active suspension, though, but he drafts and sends the instructions over to Ana. Informal. Bloodless. Not a bit of hurt about it: just the Company assignment, and the related gear, and the suggestion, there, that whatever differences their lives have been, instruction from the world’s best couldn’t hurt if the kid’s under her jurisdiction anyway.
Ana is a lot of things to Gabe.

But he only has to look down at the way the kid is curled in with his legs bent, down at the scar on the back of the exposed skin of Jesse’s left knee to be reminded that she was and continues to be a hell of a shot.

To look at it also makes Gabe wonder what might have happened if the kid really had bolted. Where he might’ve ended up. Between jobs or between legs, penniless and nameless.

God, he’s glad the kid is here. Even if it’s all fucked up, he’s glad, and almost can’t help but to move over the expanse of the bed and touch Jesse tenderly, stroking up one arm to kiss the back of his shoulder. Matters none to Jesse, who doesn’t rouse, still pressed into the sheets, breathing away just the same.

He has all of the sheets, too, wrapped up around him in some sort of organisation. They smell of him, distinctly. Of Gabe, too. The shared scent is comforting, and Gabe almost takes it for a happy accident before he remembers the way Jack had done the same, for that little while.

Midwestern boy. Thick blood. Always too warm. He’s only ever taken more than a sliver of the sheets when he’d been pregnant. Gabe didn’t even think to notice --never could marry the images in his mind of Jack with anything so base. Not after the years Jack has spent above it all: needed no alpha, never did, and there’d never been any question between either of them about who runs the show.

Gabe didn’t --and doesn’t, begrudge him that. Sort of loves (loved?) that about him. Too stubborn to die, too stubborn to be assigned a role to play. Could only be just be Jack, fully and entirely, in the exact same way that Jesse is only ever Jesse, authentic and irrepressible and unstoppable, despite every circumstance and shift of the world.

He doesn’t know if that would make it better or worse --to try to explain that to Jack. To say how he was drawn to the brightest light of the vast desert because it looked like the one left on in his bedroom left by an angel: because in the right light and the right words, Jesse and Jack are indistinguishable at the same age.

Why would he speak, anyway? Nothing is going to be forgiven. Not soon. He’s waiting on Jack’s mercy: and Jack isn’t all that merciful.
Emotional, instead. Never good at letting go. Rather let a thorn in his side fester than pull it out.

He thinks about last night. Of his conversation with Jesse. Of Jack, and if he’s --if he’d be willing to it. Gabe reasons, surely --surely, after years of wanting a family so badly, Jack should want this. In spite of everything else, it’s still some halfway between here in the bright cold of Zurich and the rosy hours of the future he used to dote on.

Jesus, what the hell is Gabe thinking about it so hard for? He can’t see the future. Can’t tell what Jack would do. Doesn’t know which force is exerting on him strongest right now: the resentment of betrayal, or the desperation to leave here. To have a baby.

He should stop ticking over, just once, and --and ask. Be bold, and love, be brave.

There’s nothing Jack could say that he wouldn’t at least deserve, right? Nothing that could kill him. Nothing he is righteously afraid of. Gabe wants to do this --wants to be brave, not just for Jesse’s sake, or Jack’s, but for his own. To prove he can. To do right by them both. There’s a mark on his neck, after all: and a boy in his bed.

He owes them both this much.

So he kisses Jesse again, softly as he can, taking in the fullness of the scent of sour sassafras root that has come to define the boy, petting the bump of his stomach every part as gently, too, before he dares to withdraw. Some promise to be back soon. To have news: good or bad or nothing.

He dresses in silence, one-armed, hardly able to bend any portion of his upper body. It takes some time. He asks for no help. Shoulders it alone, as with everything.

There’s still an itch in him, under his skin, buzzing in the back of his brain, that is hungry for the click. That needs silencing with codeine. He can ignore it, he thinks. He hopes.

He’s dressed before the full establishment of daybreak. At the door. Looking over his shoulder at the shape of Jesse, in his bed.

Looks something like home, really, with how he’s sprawled and lying, undisturbed, not a care in the world. He feels safe here --that instinct in the stem of his brain wouldn’t give him rest otherwise, and something about the way he lies gives Gabe some kind of a feeling. The longer he looks, the more he
longs to stay. To climb back under the sheets that are warm and rich with both of their scents.

But Gabe is set on being brave, or so he’s told himself. Jesse is safe where he is.

And he’ll be back soon.

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Ana doesn’t cry in the hallway, when she walks back alone.

She doesn’t cry in the ensuite bathroom, where she peels off yesterday’s clothes and stands naked in front of the glass. Not when she climbs inside the bath and starts the shower jet. Not when she washes her skin, lathering, and watching the white trail down the drain, otherwise forgotten.

It isn’t until the last bit of winter has left her —that Jack’s scent is washed off from her body that she dares. Drops down onto her knees and doesn’t even realise it until she can tell the tears apart from the hot water, and by then it’s too late.

He hadn’t even looked at her, had he? Looked through her, maybe, like she was some shade or imitation of somebody else? His best weapon against Gabriel: always had been, always will be. And she was content to be, wasn’t she? Jack didn’t force her hand last night. Has never asked anything else of her, really.

Nothing but this. Nothing but everything.

She tries to recall the details she’d tried to commit to memory. To learn everything about his skin from the brief moments there had been light enough to see the plains of his body. Strong and solid and fluid. There are freckles on his shoulders, she had seen —an old scar low on his stomach, and a tiny burn mark on the inside of his wrist from a shell casing.

More than that --how he kissed. How he fucked: by no means perfect, or what she’d been imagining, but real and present and tender. Tender like he was afraid of hurting her. Like he could hurt her any worse with his hands or any part of his body alone worse than making her cum. Letting her press her nose to his collar and imagine what it would be to be his.
Could there be anything better?

Or --or worse?

There’s no time to mourn. To be sorry. She’s grateful. She’s hurt. None of these things are useful.

So she holds the tense and fetal-like position for no more than a few minutes. Her tears stop. She climbs out of the shower and dries herself in the mirror. Silent. Composed. Okay, again, if only in steadiness. She doesn’t look for any marks of last night. He never left any.

Fareeha’s transport will be landing soon. Ana had planned to meet her in Canada, originally --but that was before she’d taken Jesse to Zurich. Before she’d been tasked with Blackwatch, and Jack’s work, and the Deadlock boy to boot. This is the best she can do, now --to try to make time for her daughter as best she can.

Ana is not like Jack. She will not ride this train to it’s bitter end. She will do the job she can, for as long as she can. Nothing more or less --nothing like dying over it.

She prepares herself for the way. Peruses her mail as she finishes braiding her hair --something from Gabriel, giving the little Deadlock boy a place in one of the company rosters, and some small suggestion of her guidance. As if she hasn’t been giving it already. As if she hasn’t been his only port in the storm.

Why not, anyway? Fareeha does nothing short of begging her to go to the range, and to demonstrate, and every time, Ana has to refuse her. To wiggle her way out of it, because she wants to believe there’s something she can teach the girl beyond killing. Doesn’t want the still-pure nature of her girl corrupted into thinking that it’s like a party trick when Ana’s rifle cracks and her target falls.

Another sniper would save her the workload, too. Would give her some kind of foot in the door with Blackwatch. And even if she is trying to remain impartial, she likes the kid. Jesse’s got as good a heart as Fareeha --as Jack, on his best days. Trusting and honest and sweet in some naive way. She knows the cost of those traits --and know the cost of them even better given the boy’s designation.

It’s instinct, she knows. To try to protect him. They all have to protect each other: her and Jack and Jesse alike as omegas, and the instinct runs deep.
Maybe it’s the reason she’s far more distant with Angela, a bright sweet girl, but undeniably an alpha. Who will need no help from Ana, and Christ, will probably one day be giving her the orders, having forgotten past kindnesses.

Ana’s been around long enough to know the way of things. To know Jesse will need all the help he can get, not just with his own, hard decisions, but on the rest of the long road ahead. Overwatch is about as far from Deadlock as it gets, and the boy has a lot of learning to do.

She passes a short affirmation back to Gabriel. Sends some alert along to the boy himself, to let him know where she’ll be later in the day, if he would like to rendezvous with her.

She does not think of the night before. The weeks that will come. The empty sort of ache in her chest.

Fareeha will be waiting in the hangar.

She should go.

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Jack makes it to his desk before the day has had the chance to become loud, or brutal.

His Zurich office always looks adrowse, somehow. There’s early, lilac daylight coming in over the snow-capped mountains through the large window behind him. The main lights are not on. There are no slides open --only the dreamlike impression of the Overwatch symbol, translucent where one will be in moments.

It lights up the area of his desk like he’s underwater. He feels as if he is. He doesn’t know what he feels.

But his schedule is full. Can no longer ask anything of Ana --will not, no matter how hard it becomes. No matter how his chest seizes just a little bit every time he sees the little white circle of Overwatch because of that tiny embroidered blue sleepsuit stuffed into his bottom draw in Gran Mesa
like some shameful, painful secret, and no matter how he sort of wishes he could jump from the roof.

He can’t ask for anymore help --not even when he activates his desktop and the last thing that had been on it opens: that old picture of he and Gabe, turned away, fingertips tracing like some intimate play at holding hands. Post war, pre- -their- -war: so sudden and out of context that Jack closes it immediately, just to cope.

And then --then when his breath comes back, briefly abducted, tight in his chest, he opens it again, slowly. Trying to brace himself.

What did he do? Jesus, he only has to look at Gabe to see the sincerity on him, there. How their shoulders align at the same height and their posture is symmetrical and Jack sees them as two halves of a whole and then it really hits him. What --what did he do? What did they do to each other?

How did they wander so far? He doesn’t remember a time he stopped being like the man on the left of the shot. Doesn’t recall what made him transform into this --this thing: become hard and frantic and cruel in the face of it all. Doesn’t remember Gabe’s hand sliding from his. Did he turn to look too late? Did he let it go himself?

Is that why Gabe struck first? The little Deadlock boy --was he some revenge? The same cold, hard intention as Jack: just to feel something. Just to fuck something. Or worse: is it love? Did the hand that stopped holding Jack’s find someone new to hold, in the space of what feels like tens seconds that Jack was looking away?

And --and now; now he’s lost to Ana. Lost to them all, or losing: alone in the dark of this room. It’s supposed to feel good. To feel like some kind of equity: so Gabe can feel how it feels. Pain shared, not lessened, but there’s no joy to it at all. No joy to any of this. No thought to it.

They’re supposed to --they’re not supposed to be here. It isn’t supposed to go like this. Jack thinks about the direction his life should have taken. Where he should be, right now: gone from here, or at least going. Nineteen weeks. Excited. Prepared. About to step into the picture frame of the scene he’d first fallen in love with imagining.

Anything but this emptiness; no child, no mate, no friend. Jack feels like he holds the weight and pressure of the entire ocean. That he is the pinhead on which the world is balancing.

That’s what he asked for, isn’t it? They needed somebody to put through the machine --somebody’s
face to put on it all, and Jack was so happy to oblige, stepping up to his role on the same day that they purged Gabe of his pills and left quivering and feverish and weak. The title is his reward and punishment, all at once, and Jack won’t be blindsided.

So he takes in a breath. Pretends the world isn’t ending. Closes the picture. Opens his schedule. Turns on the main light overhead.

The German Consul will be here in less than an hour, and Vikingasveitin immediately afterwards, amidst concerns of terrorism from within Iceland, somehow coming in before a meeting with a brand of the Chinese government concerning nationalism and the committee responsible for an escort task for a Saudi heiress and diplomat. None of them are concerned in the least with Jack: or his misery.

And he’ll bear it, he thinks. Can distract himself with it if he throws himself deeply enough into it.

That’s until he sees some alert in the bottom of his holodesk. Some small alert that he feels uneasy about before he even opens it: and he does, a small movement to see a meeting request.

Formal. Procedural.

Gabe?

Gabe: now?

He closes the request. Thinks he’ll be sick, for all of this, if he even deserves to feel guilty, and for it all. Thinks, Jesus Christ, he can’t go on. But he goes on.

So he opens the meeting request: moves it to nine. As far away from him as he can, to the back to the queue. To the back of his list of priorities. He’ll have a plan, by then. A conversation they can have: if that’s what Gabe really wants.

This will hurt him. Hurt them both, but then what? Aren’t they familiar enough with it by now? Won’t this just be another thing to survive, disfiguring as it is?

Jack approves the request.
He goes on.

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Nine comes, as if to spite them both.

Gabe is waiting out in the hall: dark, by now, nought but artificial lights to illuminate him. Nothing out here to give him an indicate of Jack, or his moods, or how he’ll be found. Nothing to prepare him. All he can dwell on are Jesse’s words to him --about finding somebody who can do something for their child; and about when last he saw Jack.

Adrift, and in pieces, on Ana.

He doesn’t resent Jack any for that, now. Doesn’t resent the sterility of the hall outside the office, or the way he can’t feel Jack’s presence or shadows on the wall. He contents himself to wait. Praying for Jack to make the first move --to open the door. To let him know if he’s welcome inside.

That’s how it should be. But moments pass--ten minutes pass. The light inside the office remains on. The silence persists.

Nothing happens.

Gabe’s brain aches. The silence wounds him. It feels hot and heavy and unnatural, like the pressure of the air before a storm. He stands up, after some time, unable to carry the words he’s been meaning to say since the morning: the heaviest ones, formed with Jesse’s nose in his collar, and his hand over the kid’s stomach. He stands up in the dark of the hall and goes over by the door.

‘Strike Commander J. Morrison’. There was a time that wounded him. He got over that. They both did.

Gabe knows it’s not the reason for the sick nervousness in him to raise his hand, and fight through his inertia to knock on the door. But it’s easier, that way, to pretend that’s the reason. To imagine this is a scene he’s played before, and this is a recognisable horror they’ve conquered before.

He does knock, too. Manages that much, before he steps back. Waits on the silence to indicate if Jack is in there, moving towards the door, or if he remains still and unmoving in his feeling.

Somewhere in-between. There’s some unnaturally cowed and quiet response. It takes Gabe a full minute to realise it’s even Jack.

“It’s open.”

The onus shifts, then, back onto Gabe. He’s got to make the move: open the door, step inside. Sit down. Open his mouth and --jesus, what the fuck can he say? He doubts he could get Jesse’s name out right now, if he were asked. Let alone talk about a baby, or --or adoption. Clumsy words his mouth won’t fit around. Clinical terms that make a mockery of Jack’s own hope.
Gabe can’t go in.

He goes in.

Hand on the handle --his good one. The one not slung from where his elbow shattered, turning. Revealing the office inside: the lilac of the night as it is, now. The large screen of one wall, hissing out about a thousand different things at once. The desk: a small plant on one corner. No other decorations or pictures of personal effects that Gabe recognises.

But a bottle of amber liquid. Two glasses, one half-full.

The man behind it, half-empty.

Jack’s usually well-seeming figure is obscure in the smudged light of the room. Gabe can only see the impression of him from the door. The best of the screen light catching the whitest parts of his hair. His expression unreadable, but not neutral. His posture strange, arms flat on the desk but drawn in towards him. Back straight.

Gabe closes the door for his own sake. As if to make sure he knows he has nowhere to run to.

He doesn’t think he stands there for too long -- a minute, if that. Long enough for Jack to say, “Sit down.”

Not unkindly. Not an order. Gabe doesn’t know what that tone is.

But he sits, anyway. Unable to scent familiar winter. Fearful that the first of the January frost has melted. There’s no hint in the room of wintergreen or pine. He looks at Jack’s neck, then, recalling the stiff white of the bandage he’d seen a few days before: but the higher collar of his uniform gives away nothing about the scentlessness of the room.

Jack doesn’t really look at him. Pours a drink, presumably for Gabe. As something to do? An evasive tactic, or preparation?

Gabe never was much of a drinker. Preferred more convenient vices. Ones easier to hide. Not like Jack, he knows, he drinks easier --first of the two of them to reach for the bottle. He takes the glass, anyway, once Jack is finished pouring, if only to do something, waiting for a cue to drink.

He wants to tell Jack how glad he is to see him. How good he looks --even if he looks like hell, really. But his mouth stays shut, and so much the better, too.

Gabe leans heavy on the arms of his chair. Jack does the talking.

“I need you to go to Belarus.” He says. Non-sequitur. No warning --nothing. It comes out just like that, Belarus never having been brought up between them, not on Gabe’s radar or even in Blackwatch’s periphery, really. “Reconnaissance in Minsk. Two weeks, at least.”

Gabe looks down into the glass. He swallows. “I thought I was suspended.”

Jack doesn’t even hesitate to reply. His mouth makes the words more like a bite. “Not if you’re in Belarus.” What he doesn’t say is implicit in that much: it’s an order, and he can make that clearer, if he needs to.
That’s not what concerns Gabe so much as the timing. If this were so pressing, why would he tell Gabe now? Why not by email, earlier in the day? Why approve the meeting request, and force himself to be across the table from Gabe if he could avoid it? Maybe Jack is just searching to punish himself.

Or maybe there’s a reason.

Gabe thinks about the soviet cold. About Jesse, alone here, for two weeks at a minimum: his gut twisting in that instinctive sort of way that wants to curl itself around Jesse and protect him. He says, “I didn’t realise this was so urgent.”

A ploy. Jack knows this game well enough to fire back easily, “It is.” He says. Again, no circumstance or majesty or rank. He says it with this terseness: this desperation, like he just wants Gabe to go, already. “Transport will be in Hangar 3 in four hours.”

No argument, then. No discussion.

Gabe doesn’t deserve to argue. Not after everything, not even in spite of Jesse’s wellbeing --so he lifts the glass and takes a short pull. Rye whiskey. It’s nasty. He doesn’t care but to nod. Takes his time to speak. Knows it’s likely some test of strength.

Eventually, he murmurs, “Belarus, then.” It’s all he can manage, for now. He tries to remind himself of why he came here. The picture Jesse had forced him to see. The life growing inside of the kid. Old daydreams like ghosts. How can he say it, without sounding cruel? Without reminding Jack of his own vacancy?

Jack sounds short to speak. “Gabe--”

“There’s--” They speak at the same time. They look at one another, properly, for the first time since Gabe found himself in Zurich. Jack’s eyes are a sea of tragedy. The marks of Gabe’s defense are gone, really. No sign of the struggle on him. Maybe that’s for the best. The reminders wouldn’t serve Jack in the same way they serve Gabe. His every breath hurts.

Jack’s eyes move away first. Deferring? Waiting? Whatever it is, he lets Gabe speak first.

And Gabe does his best to sound clinical about it. To put emotion far from it all, despite the business of it. “Agent McCree got assigned to B Company.” He begins. He sounds hard and unnatural. Can hardly call the kid by that name.

The words are dangerous in themselves. Jack’s shoulder tense. “I heard.” He says. The words bullied out of him, like an accusation.

Gabe didn’t come this far to be scared away so easily. He’ll say his piece. He will. Even if it takes him a solid minute of silence to find the right words.

Gabe finds them eventually. “There’s--there’s something else.” He looks up at Jack. Jack is looking through him. No help. No coaxing. He has to say it. “He’s, uh--he’s made some other decisions.” He swallows. “Regarding, uh----”

How can he say it? How can he say it to Jack’s face --any implication that this might be Jack’s only chance at a baby? It was barely months ago that he --that they were so sure. That they knew the directions of their lives. Jesus Christ, how can Gabe find the nerve to speak?
Jack doesn’t know what he’s going to say. Looks away, off to the side somewhere. Waits, dispassionately. Forcing Gabe to be bold. He’s the only one that ever could coax a bit of courage out of him.

And there’s some left, somehow. Enough that Gabe can sigh and drop his head, and whisper, “Jack, he--” Third time’s the charm. “He wants to give the baby up.” The words are more difficult than anything Gabe has ever had to say. “And you could --you could--”

“Gabe.”

Gabe can hardly hear him. “Remember, you wanted --”

But Jack doesn’t care how hard the words were to get out --only how hard they are to hear. “Gabriel.”


“That’s enough!” The sudden silence shatters into Jack’s sharp and wild yell that tapers off weakly into a quieter, angry sort of cough. “Gabe, I-I--...”

His voice turns strange at the end of the word. Mournful. Hurt. God, so hurt --the kind of pain Gabe hasn’t seen or heard since Jack was clinging to him, faint and pale and bloody, blubbering deliriously that he was sorry, he was so sorry. Something is wrong. Deeply. Not just in the new tremble to Jack’s voice, but his eyes.

Jack’s head is turned just-so. The last of the lilac evening catches the side of his eyes. Bright, they are. Brimmed with tears.

Jack sniffs, sharply. He folds his arms over each other again. His voice is barely recovered when he speaks again. Striving for a neutral tone. Not quite finding one. “There’s--” he looks at Gabe only incidentally. His gaze migrates quickly, as if fraid. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Gabe’s mind races before his mouth does. Conjures the words for Jack. ‘ It’s over ’, Is that it? Is it over --them? The game? Are they really done fooling themselves? Does he even deserve to be upset by that, if he’s the one that drove them apart --that cut them off at the root, with one stupid and rash and impulsive decision?

Gabe’s mouth closes.

Jack’s mouth opens. His tone is hard. His eyes glisten. “I slept with somebody.”

Gabe doesn’t even think. “What?”

The room’s tension worsens. The silence of it. The way the silent evening cowards behind Jack’s shoulders. Generators hum. Sounds of life continue below, but nothing within the confines of the room seem to live, or breathe, for a few solid and whole moments. Jack looks away again. To the door. To some corner of the room. He masters his expression back into nothingness.

He speaks. “Somebody you know.”
Gabe’s jaw is clamped shut. He wonders how he gets the word, “What?” out.

Jack doesn’t hesitate much this time. An inch. Maybe more --but he doesn’t look at Gabe, either. “Fifteen years.” He says --angry, distantly. “I had to know --”

“Ana.”

They both look at each other. Jack doesn’t master himself in time. There’s guilt behind his eyes, and Gabe knows even before he sees it. There’s nobody else in the world it could be. Nobody else Jack would trust enough. Nobody else that would go so willingly, that would play bait so happily for him.

Just the imagine of them, together. Of Jack rutting into her like some dog. Fucking her out of --of spite? He had to know . What does he know? Does he think Gabe did anything to hurt him? Did he think Jesse was some malicious stunt; that he wanted to bring the kid here, and like this? Like he didn’t want the kid nameless to him --a billion miles away. The other side of the goddamned Rio Grande by now.

Does Gabe even deserve to be angry? Does this make them even?

That Gabe’s crime of passion --of having resisted Jesse for so long, driven to desperation after so nearly losing him, making love incidentally in flickering light and holding the kid like a lifeline, should be ranked equal to Jack’s cold and hard intentions: setting out to wound them all. To want Gabe to feel how it feels.

Pain shared; not halved.

Gabe finds his voice, eventually. From within the rest of the wreckage. “Did she--”

Jack is looking away again. Swallowing on a pin-hole throat. “You need to go-- -”

“Did she ask you?” his voice raises, to make clear he won’t be cut off. He demands Jack’s gaze. “Did she?” But Jack won’t surrender it, and that makes the answer all the clearer. Makes the bile rise to the back of his throat to realise it. “You --you--”

He’s out of his seat and on his feet in a second. Jack is, too, the desk still between them, but Gabe between him and the door, able to keep them both here for some fucking answers. And now Jack won’t even look remotely at him --some show of fucking guilt as it comes now, turned away, his voice all small and tight like he’s begging, “You should be preparing--”

There’s a crack on the end of the word. High in pitch and tremulous. Gabe won’t hear it. “You fucking --”

Neither will Jack. Stands his ground. Raises his voice, all the same. “Stop it!” The strain in it is obvious. Awful. That Jack is standing in this room, saying these things --with the shadow of Ana’s hands all over his body, with his mark obscured from sight. Wasn’t he supposed to be their moral compass? The good one: the deep-down, uncorrupted kind, whose wisdom was supposed to save them all?

Instead, he sounds so short-sighted --so utterly self-involved to say, “We’re done here.”

“The hell we are--”Gabe takes an enormous step around to the side of the desk. Wants to reach out
and grab onto Jack and shake him or hurt him or something. Anything to stop the conversation.

“You--”

He only gets so far. Jack’s glistening eyes are not some weakness to be exploited. Not the kind where he bends under the pressure of the sadness --but full of vitriol and malice and hate. “Don’t touch me.” He hisses. “You have no right to be angry.”

The instinct in his gut flares -- to raise a hand. To be every bit as angry as Jack would deny him.

But he can’t be. Doesn’t. More confused --more hurt, than he could ever possibly be angry. This wouldn’t have been easy for Jack. It would have taken dedicate. Premeditation. The desire to wound, as deeply as venomously as he could know how.

Gabe doesn’t raise his voice. Or his hand. Can only really murmur, now, pinched and strange. “Is-- is that what you really think?”

The sudden tenderness of it: the boldness to ask. It clearly takes Jack by surprise. He still won’t look at Gabe, least of all at the vulnerability of him, now. Open for Jack’s benefit. Without weapon or accusation --having come here trying to see Jack off happy. Trying to give him the one thing he has wanted for years.

How could Jack look at him: if, in return, he has tried his very best to destroy them both?

There’s no anger left, then, really.

Just the realisation of what they’ve done to each other. Who they used to be to each other.

That it really is over, isn’t it? Even if neither of them can let go first. Even if both of them are cowards, right now.

The evening has turned in the mere moments they’ve been in the room. Nothing but shadows in the blind dark to one another. Dark enough, now, that Gabe can’t even see the large, snow-capped mountain that usually sits in the distance and looks benevolently over them all. Like there’s nothing, forever. Miles of blackness that no light or sky dare squeak through.

Jack is still standing. Pained with the tension of his form. His left hand is hard on his own neck.

Gabe wants to know what’s underneath it. If there’s anything even left to keep them bonded. He tries to articulate as much, in some snuffed out whisper of, “Jack.”

Only to have the other man turn away fully. To nearly beg him. “Please --you have to go.”

It’s what he’s good at, isn’t it: running away? Especially since now there’s no other real recourse. Nowhere else he can really go. Forced to leave Jack here, in this room, with thousands of questions gone unanswered. Forced to leave Jesse here, alone, without guidance.

Belarus is too harsh a cold imitation of winter, even for Gabe.

But Jack says, again, “Go.”

And he knows no other way but the door.
Two hours left.

Midnight looms with some unnatural quiet. The armory is in use --the range occupied. Blackwatch business: the shooting space allocated to practise under Company B. It’s not something Gabe was aware of, but it’s where he’s been told to go, to find them.

To find Jesse --the newly listed Company Agent, safe in his official status. Not liable to disappear while Gabe is not with him.

To find Ana, too.

Fifteen years is a long time. Like Jack, he has to know.

It’s the last thing he’ll know he can do, before being abducted into the darkness of night. A red-eye to start the next morning in Minsk. The instinct in him to protect will only rage against it, and he’ll be helpless and cagey and miserable with it. No relief in the tenderness of winter. No ability to cling to the desert air. There’s no red rock in eastern europe. Nothing at all.

He comes upon the range, hearing the distant sound of patient shots. Grateful for anything, really, to distract him from the emptiness between his ears. From Jack’s silence.

Even the shots cease, eventually. A magazine can only hold so many rounds. He steps inside the range door carefully, scanning the room. Fearful to see anybody --but finding only Jesse, standing in there, alone, a rifle held up to one shoulder, held with confident and good form. He’s dressed in blackwatch regulation plainclothes --ones that fit, from the square of his shoulders down to a decent enough looking pair of boots.

He’s careful with the rifle, too. Lowers it --safety-on. Places down on the counter in front of him, as if to survey the shots he’s taken.

Gabe has sharp enough eyes to see consistent grouping, if he looks. But he doesn’t --seduced and hurt all the same by the radiant energy of the kid, who hasn’t even noticed him yet. The room bears no immediate scent of citronella. Ana must be elsewhere, for the moment. This isn’t the sort of room for a goodbye, anyway.

He takes his time to look at Jesse before he speaks. Has to muster the energy for it.

“You raid the linen closet?” He manages, eventually, trying to sound easy and good-natured, but instead ending up stilted and cold. The war he’s shouldering his own --it’s not the kid’s business, and therefore, not his burden.

It’s almost theatrical --the way Jesse turns, when he hears him. Moves the earmuffs down his neck and honest-to-god grins as he snaps into formation. A hand comes up out of nowhere in some kind of salute. Gabe’s never actually thought about Jesse as a soldier, before, but there the kid stands, smart enough, for once, his hair tidied enough away under the battered hat he’d managed to retrieve from evidence.

He looks put-together --different. A stranger.

He looks well, though.
The arm comes down eventually, thank god, and then the kid seems to lapse back into forgetting himself in that utterly seductive way he’s always had. “Don’t act like y’ain’t impressed.” He says, resolutely, his left hand on his left hip. He still doesn’t stand straight, either --holds this little lean that Gabe couldn’t imagine him without. “C’mon, an’ admit it --I clean up pretty nice.”

Gabe hesitates to smile. It takes energy --it takes fooling himself into thinking he won’t have to leave his boy here, like this, in a matter of two hours, really. So he just exhales, and tries to sound playful when he says, “I’d love to see it sometime.”

Jesse makes some kind of noise of displeasure, shaking his head, dragging the toe of his shoe across the shining floor bashfully. “You always so polite?”

The large sense of regulation dies with that remark. Gabe aches to kiss the kid. To hold him better and scent him properly. Not just because of how he’s appeared to Gabe tonight or because of Jack or because of his imminent departure. It’s all of those things, really. It’s the way Jesse’s shirt fits him enough that it protrudes a few inches or so around the soft little swell of his stomach.

He should be saying goodbye. Kissing the kid like something out of a black and white movie, promising to write him, or --or something. But he’s not really moving, aware of the grim business which is the grounds by which he came here, and for once --those grounds aren’t Jesse.

He doesn’t intend to say goodbye in so many words. It’s not a word he acquaints himself with.

“Somethin’ on your mind, Gabriel?” Astute, as always, the kid walks some strange semicircle around, so he ends up closer to Gabe almost as if he didn’t mean to, hands coyly in the beltloops of his fatigues.

Gabe only thinks to shake his head. It’s not about being convincing. “Was looking for Amari.”

That seems to disappoint Jesse an inch. Ever-so-slightly crestfallen, he nods his head and juts his chin in the direction of the door. “She was’ jus casin’ up th’ other rifles.” he says, easily, plainly.

Gabe steps to the direction of the door. Nods. Knows, already, where they keep the scoped, bolt-action rifles. The only kind Ana ever cares to use. He looks back in the room, to Jesse’s keen form and the way it’s poised in his direction, as if to follow. That wouldn’t do, so he pauses to say, “Why don’t you total up your average, hotshot?”

At the lick of praise, Jesse smiles out of the side of his mouth again. “Sure thing.” He says. Understands, immediately the implication to stay. He’s already fussing with a holoscreen interface before Gabe gets to the door, and then out into the armory corridor, looking three doors down, where he can hear the general motions of stirring life. Of Ana Amari --a thief of biblical proportions, and the devil on his back for too long.

He feels some strange tension in him unfurl. There’s anger, there, but it’s some undercurrent. The wallpaper to these last fifteen years with her --and her looks and her comment and her hands all over Jack --and Jack wanting them there.

The door is open as he comes upon her form --turned away, surveying the wall, stiff and strange and unmoving. Her head is bowed. In what? Penitence? Prayer?

It doesn’t matter to Gabe.
He steps inside carelessly, alerting her enough that she turns towards his sound --and there’s some kind of agony there, on her face. Agony: that she won, finally, she got everything she could ever want, and there are the formations of tears on her hard face. Resignation in the wake of seeing him -- not fear or glee or anything recognizable, but the same vacancy that consumes them all.

She looks washed out and used up and tired.

That doesn’t matter to Gabe, either.

He reduces the distance between them until they are standing before one another.

He raises his hand.

She does not flinch.

The blow is merciless. Catchers her right across the left side of her jaw, hard enough that she staggers back, winded, a neat circle of blood already forming where her teeth and bottom lip have met. Anybody lesser would have fallen, or cried out --or felt it in some visceral way.

But Ana’s form remains hard and tense and unnatural. Her eyes are closed, but not tightly, and when they open, she looks up at Gabriel with some strange evenness. There is no victory here --no pleasure or joy or anything he thought he’d find. She isn’t braced for another. Isn’t poised for anything, but instead, draws herself up. Wipes the blood off of her face.

They just --just look at eachother, for all of about ten seconds, sizing one another up, knowing that between them there is no winner or even winning, but degrees of losing they have both felt the sting of.

Footsteps draw in from the hall. A shadow falling across the threshold of the doorway.

He hears some small, but familiar voice call out to him cheerfully. “Uncle Gabriel!”

He thinks he’ll be sick.

- 

It’s just past one when transport gives the all clear.

Some monolithic craft slips out onto the runway of the dark night, and then away. Speeds Gabe from the place at a thousand miles an hour.

Jack watches it from his office window. He’s finished the bottle. He waves it off silently.

Jesse is asleep by then --having never been told. Resting in Gabriel’s bed, none-the-wiser, sure that he’ll rise to find the alpha in the morning, or roll over in the night to find he has been joined in their nest. Fareeha is tucked safe and sound --Ana watches over her as best she can.

Departure to Minsk is as seamless and silent as it had been to Mexico, all those months ago.

Jack bandages up his neck in the dark.
He goes on.
At some time after four, Jesse stirs.

Sluggish as he is, tired, something pulls him from his sleep and he comes to looking about the darkness blearily. Looking for some external force he assumes has woken him. For --for Gabriel, and he knows that much in the back of his mind, somewhere. There’s traces of his scent in the sheets, but not enough; not nearly enough.

He lifts his head to survey the empty room, no warmth next to him on either side, of fussing with something at the other end of the room. Gabriel isn’t here, but where else could he be? A quick glance at the nightstand reveals the ungodly hour. Nobody should be anywhere but their beds at a time like this.

Jesse had last seen him leaving the range. Wandering out unusually quietly, after greeting the little miss --Miss Amari’s own daughter. The girl had been so excited to see him. Excited to meet Jesse, too, of all things. She’s the dead spit of her mother, this wise and dignified little thing that had cocked her arm in a damn salute when she’d first seen him.

And Gabriel had been all sorts of proper with her --ruffled her hair, asked her things about where she’d been and what she’d seen.

He’d been short, too, quick to leave, but in such a way that Jesse figured he’d be back at some point, or to come to find Jesse like the night before. But he’s nowhere to be seen, even now, and Jesse can feel the strange and bitter sting of disappointment or worry already. Is he being kept somewhere -- busy, or in danger, somehow? Gabriel’s scent in the sheets is waning. Jesse feels less and less safe by the minute.

He turns over in the sheets, trying to find some pocket of it for his benefit --something to ease the sharp and bright stab of the nesting anxiety in the back of his brain. There’s none he can find, though, and chasing sleep feels so futile that he finds himself at the end of his tether quickly. Driven to desperation enough to access the holopoint on the nightstand, bringing an interface into life, and squinting at it in the light.

There’s a second of blurriness before he manages to adjust, reading the notification on the dash that says ‘colourblind mode engaged’. For Gabriel? Jesse doesn’t waste much of his energy worrying over it.

He’s not native to the technology. He hesitates over the visible commands --unsure of what they do, or which will best help him. Despite his drowsiness, he coughs sharply, knowing his best guess is
simply to ask. His voice is reedy in the dark, and shy. “Where, uh --where’s Gabriel?”

There’s a second where he thinks he hasn’t been heard, or that maybe this little interface isn’t like the one he’d been using in the training hall during the BLEAT --but then he sees a stylised ‘A’ spring into life, and respond in some low voice, “Commander Reyes is off-site.”

The slide darkens, and shifts, to bring up some kind of profile. Jesse is immediately fascinated by it --eased, somehow, by just the image of Gabriel. Some frontal shot of his face, with all of his pride and quiet dignity. Not just that --but the detail. All of these things Jesse has never thought to ask about: Gabriel Elias Reyes, forty-one, born on the ninth of November forty-one winters ago, hailing from California. There are records beneath --history of military service, a little ‘ɑ’ under designation.

The information there is obviously part of some public record, easily accessible, and yet, it still feels like some intimate and illicit secret. There’s a joy to it --that for all of his mystery, Gabriel can be known. How old he is. How far from home he is.

Further down, Jesse can see a heading for ‘location’, unhelpful as it is, with nothing listed beneath but ‘[Clearance Insufficient]’. Whatever that means, and wherever Gabriel really is --Jesse had heard it clear enough: not here.

But it seems bearable with his mind elsewhere. Duly distracted --fascinated as he is by the personnel profile. Testing the name in his mouth again --the full name. What would it be to know Gabriel fully? To be able to talk to him about California? Or all that he’s seen, without that stoicism to him. That resistance to being known, or what it might be: defense mechanism.

His curiosity is piqued, now --he can come back to Gabriel. There’s more he wants to know. More he’s curious too.

“Miss Amari.” he says, then, voice a little clearer in the waking. “Show hers.”

The slide shifts, and Gabriel's face is replaced by Miss Amari’s: younger, there, than he thinks she is, but no less lovely. A long, dark braid sneaks down from a beret, royal blue in colour. The mark on her eye watches, salient and silent. There’s pride to her, too, but a different sort.

She’s younger. Mansoura is listed as her home --much further than California. Jesse can hardly imagine the bright sands of Egypt, or the air, arid as his home, but different. Ana sounds almost too gentle a name for her -- Ana Neith Amari. Omega as him, but that’s where the similarity ends. She has years upon years of experience. He can see. Not passed over in favour of the use of her body. A captain. A professional. A mother, too, somehow.

The little miss --Fareeha, has been stuck in his mind since she first saluted him. He can’t even properly say why. All he knows that it springs from the same source as the niggling anxiety at the back of his brain, worrying over the loss of Gabriel.

He doesn’t want to think of why. Then he’ll just think of Johnny, and that will do nobody any good at all.

Instead, having abandoned immediate notions of sleep, he considers himself done with Miss Amari’s profile. He’s remembered himself, and now, he’s curious about that too.

“Show mine.” He says.
Thing is, there’s no clearance walls on his own profile. He can see his prison shot --bruised and bloody, with murder in his eyes and brains in his hair. They’d never even given him the decency of a shower. His name, which is not something he’s seen written much, as he has no real connection or investment to either ‘Cassidy’ or ‘McCree’. His birthday is already on there. It confuses him --birthplace as it is, listed as Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Jesse doesn’t think he’s ever been to Tennessee.

He’s confused enough to read over the words twice --and then twice more. He only had memories of New Mexico, really. Red rock. Mall towns. Abandoned gas stations and irradiated, vast horizons. Surrounded on all sides by great rock formations that made a seam to hem him into the deadlock gorge, to even be here is a great mystery to him, with stranger mountains that watch him but do not keep him. But Tennessee? The blue ridge?

There’s no history or basis to it. Gabriel never asked where he came from, or how he ended up where he ended up. But the idea, it has to come from somewhere.

It feels strange to ask the empty room. To phrase it in real words. But he does his best, scanning the page past ‘light duty’, and ‘assignment: company b’, reading over the words again before speaking. “Why’s the record say that? Chatter -- Chattanooga?”

There’s a second of latency, before a response. The voice is at least calming. “Personnel information was obtained from existing medical records.” There’s another second before the slide changes --moving to a harsh off-white. A scan of some document. “Chattanooga was the city listed on the birth certificate obtained.”

It’s only upon hearing it that he realizes that’s what it is. It’s difficult to read, but he can make out ‘state of tennessee’ at the top. His own name, and birthday. And, beneath it, filled out in a confusing and disjointed sort of cursive, he can sort of make out the other details.

Item 6: ‘were the parents married/mated?’ bears a distinct no that Jesse hasn’t real feeling about. He doesn’t really believe in it. Has seen enough of the men that mill around the gorge not to mourn his father much. But his attention is much more deeply drawn the rest of it. Item 7: ‘this was the 1st child of the mother’. Were there others, he wonders, after him? Brothers and sisters? The idea is strange --impossible to him, really.

But no more strange and impossible than the way his throat seizes all funny to read her name, under item 8. Cassidy Alice Ivers-McCree.

Cassidy. Cassie. His Cassie. The woman that is the ‘we’ of he.

He presses at her name pathetically. His throat is still tight. He doesn’t want to cry in the dark, here. “Show me --show me hers.”

There’s another second of silence. He holds his breath in it. He wants to see what she looked like. If it’s from her he inherited his dark eyes, or the flick of his hair or the cut of his hips.

But he is met with disappointment. “There are no records under this name listed under the database.” Jesse’s eyes drop. “Would you like me to expand the search?”

“Yeah.” he says --looks up again, then, if only to read the name one more time. If only to memorise it and taste it in his mouth. He’s never had any history to him before: lived his whole life strange and
displaced, cut off at the root. A few ripples of where he came from, and nothing more. Maybe that’s what fascinates him about the little miss and her mother: the completeness of it.

He’s still looking for his tribe, for tangible people to be the ‘we’ of his he, instead of chasing shadows. Thinks, in Gabriel, or here, he’s closer than he was out there in the dirt. They’re all separate people to him, he knows, but in these isles, he’s got Gabriel on his side.

The slide is frozen, as if in thought, and then eventually, he hears some confirmation. “These are the most relevant results.” he can see twooverlayed. The first is clear to him, with the dark finger-and-thumbprints, and the sharp, angry handwriting and the layout. It’s an arrest report, with her name at the top. Her fingers on the sheet. Her charge? Prostitution.

Maybe the apple doesn’t fall very far from the tree, then.

It makes him too sad to see—to imagine the image of the Cassie that he’d conjured being defiled on the motel sheets, fucked while slung rudely across some thin mattress. And Jesse knows what her agony would be in those moments. Cigarette burns, big hands clamped hard on his throat—or the worst: the harrowing torture of being fucked into, in heat, without any knot to satisfy, the misery prolonged but never satisfied. Men too cheap to pay. He has to close that document out of a desire to respect.

But then he wishes he hadn’t.

Beneath it, harsh in black and white, he can see her name, again. Twenty-four is too young to die. To die in New Mexico, too, of pennyroyal toxicity. It’s a mercy that Jesse doesn’t know the meaning of the words. A blessing he doesn’t look them up to know how she’d bled to death on Miss Marie’s doorstep after a spoonful too much of the oil had blood coming from her eyes and her ears and from between her legs too quickly to staunch.

Too scared to get fixed, but barely able to care for her other baby: the six-year-old, who’d still been sleeping.

The death certificate doesn’t say that much.

He doesn’t look at it for too long. Doesn’t know how much it hurts, just yet. The name had made her real—knowing it made him wonder on what she’d looked like. What made her laugh, or cry. And if she ever really loved him. If she’d carried him as a prisoner: with all the hesitance and fear that Jesse now does the same.

He wants Gabriel. He doesn’t want to be alone with these thoughts, or this information, but Gabriel isn’t here and the sheets barely smell like him anymore and maybe it wouldn’t all be so bad if he were marked but he’s not. He’s just--just adrift, here. Out of context. Cut and pasted from a prison cell, and frightened, with the one that brought him somewhere off-site, and somewhere that isn’t here with no warning when he left or when he’ll be back.

Jesse wants to turn back in. Close his eyes and rest, but he feels so deeply disturbed by everything he’s seen. He is fitful in the sheets in the trying, though, pressing deep into them to try and find remnants of his alpha. It isn’t enough, though—not nearly.

An hour later drives him elsewhere. At another door across the way. Any port in a storm.

The little miss is at the door he knocks at, opening it with a hand rubbing at her eyes, pyjama-clad,
and so tiny, even in all of her twelve years. She looks up at him, bewildered, but seems to note the
tense and caged look of him. The way his eyes shine with distress and keeps his posture looked and
rigid. He opens his mouth to ask for her mother.

Miss Amari appears behind her daughter in a second.

“Jesse?” She asks, but to see her --to see her after imagining his mother just the same, all
benevolence and dark skin and kind eyes and firmness, it’s too much. The moment his eyes are upon
her he feels something terrible come upon him: his chest tightens, his bottom lip curls, and he thinks
that despite his very best efforts, he’s going to cry.

Miss Amari needs no explanation. She takes him into her arms immediately --and that’s what breaks
him most of all. She’s there for him, physically, cradling his back as he coughs out these angry, loss-
ridden tears, trying his best to get out air and words enough to explain, “She --s-she’s dead--...”

She doesn’t ask. Holds him in the door as he gets it out, and then eventually, leads him further into
the room, and onto a small loveseat where she comes to sit with him and let him get it all out. Little
miss goes across to the other side of the room, and Jesse thinks maybe it’s because she’s trying to
give them privacy, or she’s frightened.

But then when he’s calm enough to stop shaking, and to be stiller, she brings him over some small
 teacup in offering and looks at her mother, sagely.

Neither of them ever say anything to him. No, the room is still and quiet, and eventually the pain of it
all exhausts him enough that he feels overwrought and tiny. It’s as if she can sense it, then, when
Miss Amari takes his teacup and places it away from them, on the table. Has him lay, with his head
in her lap, her hands stroking over the knotting, bedraggled hair, soothing him into closing his eyes
with her gentle ministrations and the gentle citronella of her scent.

There’s something to it --about the comfort of another omega. Jesse heard that, once. But he falls
asleep too quickly to be able to think much more on it. Too quickly to be aware of Ana draping an
old blanket over him, and leaving him, settled as he is.

There’s time to talk in the morning. And at least when she’s watching over the boy as he sleeps, she
isn’t thinking of Jack.

At least, not fully.

-

June in Minsk is bright and harsh.

Gabriel is ingratiated into the KDB only hours after his arrival, hushed into quiet corridors and long
rooms with formal men. For the purposes of it, he’s some internal contact secreted from the east
coast, with sensitive information on a number of carrier projects. For further purposes, he’s out of
Zurich. Away from Jack. Unable to get his hands on the man anymore.

It’s a week before he gets any real information, and it comes in the form of two previous cached
imports that are now in KDB hands: new paramilitary tech, smuggled, and distinctly american, and a
nice assortment of downers that are distinctly un-american. Japanese, in fact. Not quite to Gabe’s
taste --newer, something he’s seen in field reports from some of his company men. Experimental.
Military-grade sedative barbiturates.
If they’re here, in the same place as the tech, it means there’s a juncture. Some overlap between remnants of Deadlock, and the Shimada-gumi. A contact.

Jack wouldn’t send him out here for no reason. And he hasn’t.

(But Gabe hasn’t seen the proceedings from the UN to try to instigate an inquest about Deadlock. The loaded gun in Jack’s inbox --the one he’ll bury at the bottom of a lake before firing it at Gabe.

Feeding him to the wolves is too merciful.

He’ll die by a different pair of hands. )

-The world continues to turn, at Zurich.

Jesse feels Gabe’s absence like a missing limb. He leaves messages. None are answered. Miss Amari makes it easier.

He spends most of his time in and out of the range, getting comfortable with the three kinds of scoped rifles they carry, as well as most of his tactical gear --the ballistic knife still a wondrous sort of mystery to him, but the service pistol an old and familiar friend. There are times his attentions are pulled elsewhere --to measures of counterintelligence and other things he understands far less, or light exercise, which is the worst of all.

Miss Amari says that they have to keep it up so that he’ll be viable for active duty all the sooner. It takes him the rest of the day to muster the courage to sequester her in a quiet part of a hallway to tell her what he told Gabriel. About better families. About keeping the baby.

She laughs and tells him it still won’t get him out of exercise. Just that, later on, he’ll probably be relegated to the pool.

Jesse doesn’t know how to swim. But he doesn’t tell her that, though.

The little miss is only present sometimes, but he likes it all the better to have her there. Miss Amari has them work through lots of different things together, and at first Jesse thought it was merely a convenient way to look over the girl and him all at once, but he soon learns, when seeing the girl waiting genuine anticipation at the armory’s locked door, that Fareeha enjoys their time together just as much as Jesse.

He thinks he ought to envy her. Sees them, sometimes, with Miss Amari standing behind her, guiding the scope with an easy hand. Wishes he could recall anything similar at all to be of use to him. Wishes that he’d had the guidance of Miss Amari, and not dusty, half-recalled memories and a death certificate filed twelve years ago.

But Jesse doesn’t begrudge the little miss for anything. He welcomes her company in training. It happens enough that Miss Amari sends them away, together, after a morning session.

“I have an engagement at quarter past.” She says, imploringly, as if she’s sorry she has other jobs to attend to. “Please, take lunch.” her eyes move to the little miss. “You can spend the afternoon with Angela.” It’s said pleasantly, as if good news. The name means nothing to Jesse, and while it does to
Fareeha there’s dissent in the girl’s expression like she takes issue with it.

Her tone is innocuous enough. Jesse can’t speak on the nature of her words. “What about Uncle Jack?” she’s asked before, too. Miss Amari never likes it. Never gives her an answer, though, either. “I thought he was going to show m--”

“Jack is busy.” Miss Amari says --erring on sharply, but not fierce enough. It’s said with the reflexive nature of recoiling from a burn. Jesse can’t guess on what lies beneath. He has no concept of any Jacks --only of Johns and Johnnys, but he knows better than to ask. There’s only nuances and subtleties with Miss Amari: he appreciates that enough not to drag anything into the light of day. “But there will be time--”

The little miss straightens at the perceived injustice of it all. “You said that yesterday.”

It does her no favours. “I know what I said.” she says, a little more stern, but with greater patience, as if she doesn’t want to seem curt or unreasonable. Jesse reckons she’s the most reasonable person in the whole world maybe. “We’ll make some time. You’ll have to be patient.” It’s said like an order. No room to argue, and the way she says it gives him the impression that she is very used to giving out final words.

Jesse’s hungry enough anyway. He nudges the little miss’ shoulder playfully. “C’mon.” He says. “I’ll keep ya company.”

The girl eyes him up curiously. She likes him --he thinks, and seems to tolerate the remark enough to nod, eventually. Miss Amari is looking at him, too, as if thanking him with her gaze. The idea of pride --of her pride, warranted by him, is the most precious thing he’s come across here, so he’s glad for it.

It’s all the convincing that’s needed. Miss Amari leaves her girl with a short little squeeze of a hug. Jesse doesn’t get one --doesn’t ask, really. They’re professionals, after all. It’s a word he swears he never heard at all in the first sixteen years of his goddamn life. Only ever heard it come out of Miss Marie’s mouth before, but back then, it meant that being savvy, getting paid first. Getting to say when and how much. Not like how Miss Amari says it --like it’s this expectation, and not some suit of armor.

No, instead, she gives him nothing but a curt nod before she parts. There’s trust, in that --she trusts him with her daughter.

That niggling at the back of his head is some kind of way at the prospect. He wishes Gabriel were here.

But what he says is, “Hungry?”

The little miss is happy to nod at that, having resigned her defiance. Looking up at him as if to suggest he lead the way, and then, when she notes his hesitance to lead, or indeed, to move, she takes up the mantle all by herself. There’s enough of her mother that it seems so natural.

“Angela will be in the south wing.” The girl explains, slowly, as if she expects Jesse will not understand. She has already stepped to marching the way forward. He draws behind, and they head down one of the long corridors towards the elevator. He’s glad to, hunger really setting in by now. It never used to be so bad this time of morning. “You don’t have to walk with me.”
It’s said so curtly --like the little miss is indulging him with her time that he has to laugh. “I don’t mind it.” He jokes, in a pleased voice. “Sorta like havin’ a guided tour.” The girl steps in the elevator. He steps in with her, after a very brief hesitation. “Less you want me t’scram.”

The little miss look up at him as the doors close, effectively sealing them together, and that proud, quietly dignified sort of look then gives way to a smile, pure and unbridled enough in it’s form that she, for once, looks her age. “You can stay.” She says, playfully, as they begin to descend. “You’re not so bad.”

Jesse has to laugh at that, again. “Guess I don’t mind you, either.”

They continue to descend. It makes him feel ever-so-slightly dizzy, but not enough to say anything about. Maybe it’s the lack of natural light in the elevator that stifles him. Maybe it’s lots of things, he’s not sure. He thinks through in the silence, fiddling with his hands, never very content to remain still for long. Especially since he can see the little miss looking at him, every so often, and pointedly, too.

He’s known there’s something she wants to say for a whole minute when she finally gets the nerve to say it.

“Mum says I’m not allowed to ask you about the mark on your arm.” That’s what she opens with, saying it almost coyly. Hiding both arms behind her back and swaying, like she’s nervous. Jesse almost misses what she’s referring to until he looks down. It’s easy to forget about: the neat little mark he’d been branded with as some punishment for trying to slip the noose. So that no matter where he goes, Deadlock will always have a hand on him.

“You wanna ask?” He looks her up and down. Expecting more courage.

But it’s not lack of courage holding her back. The elevator doors open. She steps out hesitantly, as if lost in thought. Or as if reluctant to keep talking. “I want to know,” She says, quietly, taking a few steps, before pausing, and looking right up at him with eyes serious enough that Jesse stops, too. “That mark --it’s the same one that group used. The ones who destroyed that bridge.”

Jesse had almost forgotten about that, too. About all of those bigger intentions he never even saw.

His turn to look away.

The girl notes that. Seems only to fuel her in letting the little interrogation slide into its terminal phase. “Were you part of them?” She asks him. Her voice is hard and almost angry.

It’s easy to be honest. Relieving. “No.” Jesse says. It’s perhaps not as simple as that, but it feels good, all the same, to be able to divorce himself from it. “No, it --I weren’t a part of ‘em. They jus’ used me.” He thinks, in some small part that Gabriel would be proud if he were hearing those words. To know that Jesse’s allegations has shifted, in the space of these short weeks. Maybe not to the company in Blackwatch he has yet to see, or even the looming shadow of Overwatch, here, under the fortified gaze of the cold mountain; but at the very least to Gabriel.

The girl gets none of what he’s thinking. Just his words, and seems relieved enough, even if there’s some new concern on her face. At least they’ve started walking again. This cafeteria is only at the end of the hall and he can smell the food from where he’s standing.
“Used you?” Her mouth works all funny. Curiosity piqued, now, he’s not close to hearing the end of it now.

It sounds strange to hear back to himself. They join the queue that’s formed. Jesse can hardly focus on the words over the food, but has enough clarity to wonder about getting some sleeves. If the little miss recognises Deadlock’s image, she’s not going to have been the only one.

He moves forward in line and tries to think of some way to explain it. “Well,” He scratches his jaw, “Guess it was more, uh --more mutual than that.” although, after he’ said it, he supposes it wasn’t all that much more mutual. Somebody hands him a tray of something --full enough with food that he doesn’t think to complain. Instead, steps out of the line, waiting the the little miss to lead them to a seat. “I was a uh --a hustler.”

The girl looks over her shoulder as she leads the way, down a few rows, to sit in front of some slight and pale girl who looks a little fraught. Jesse doesn’t see the sense in arguing. He’s already got his teeth into a piece of toast as Fareeha nods all patient and sweet, smiling to the other girl. “Good morning, Angela.”

The fraught one --Angela, who he thinks he recognises from the infirmary. The one who’d told him off when he’d gone to see Gabriel, all laid up as he’d been. This is the first time he’s had a chance to consider her: alpha, new to it, but soft in her scent. Violets, he thinks, all the clearer next to the little miss’ scentlessness.

She looks from the girl to him, scanning with these astute little eyes in the span of about a second before turning on a smile, as if remembering, and murmuring softly, or tiredly, “Always nice to see you, Fareeha.” She says. “Who’s your friend?”

The word makes Jesse feel all the better.

“This is Jesse.” Fareeha says, mildly. “He’s with Blackwatch, but he used to be a hustler.”

For a second.

The look on the Angela girl’s face is some instantaneous journey from politely curious to suspicious to outright horrified in the span of less than a second and a half. Somehow she manages to blanche further, one of her hands coming up as if to cover her mouth, her eyes darting away eventually like she feels embarrassed enough for the both of them.

“Excuse me?” She manages, after a moment.

Jesse wonders if he won’t drop dead right then and there. If he could breathe properly, he’d try to explain things. But if he could explain things, he thinks he’d vomit.

Fareeha seems still to be in that beautiful stage of ignorance. The depth of the faux pas hasn’t dawned on her, yet, so she turns her head to look up at him innocently. “Did I get it wrong?”

For all of the circumstance, he can’t bring himself to lie to her. And even if he could, there’s no nicer explanation for the mark on his arm. It’d only take a quick look on his record, just like how he’d looked at Gabriel’s. He thinks of Los Angeles. He dips his head. “Naw, that’s --that’s about right.”

Angela seems to regard him very coolly, for a second there. Like she doesn’t want the little miss
sitting so close to him. Like the girl hasn’t been watching him shoot, at his shoulder, for the past week and a half.

He doesn’t know if it’s better or worse for the girl to turn to him, as if in an aside, and ask, in some gentle voice, “That’s like a salesman, isn’t it?” She asks --the picture of naivety. “You didn’t hurt people, like them.” The second part isn’t a question.

Jesse appreciates the distinction. There was a time he longed to be in the collective: thought maybe Deadlock was his tribe and even if his designation meant they’d never see him as much, they’d at least see him at all and he’d have some purpose in the chaos of it all. But he isn’t ‘them’ --he’s seated squarely on the greener grass, now, eating a full meal, free to come and go as he pleases, clothed and fed and looked over.

That’s his present. He still owes the little miss an explanation about his past.

“It’s sorta like bein’ a salesman.” He says, roundly, watching the girl across the table’s face, to see if she’s detecting the lie, and moving to expose him for what he is. “Was my job to make people happy.” That much, he guesses, is true. Pills to sleep or numb the waking loneliness. To make the leather-faced prairie dogs that roamed his parts feel invincible; to make them stop or go twice as fast. Or just have some warm, wet place to sink into. “Sometimes that was sellin’ things, and sometimes it was jus’ my company.”

The girl is looking at him with wonder, now, like she’s really intrigued. Let in on some illicit secret. Far too young to understand it --any of it, but desperate to ask. “What kinds of things?”

“Fareeha.” The Angela girl cuts in at last, in her gently accented voice, looking terse and awkward. Like she’s embarrassed on Jesse’s behalf. “Why don’t you let Jesse eat his breakfast?” She looks at him, briefly. “I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to answer these questions afterwards.”

Jesse can’t tell if it’s a mercy or an indictment. If he’s already said too much, or if the girl is coming to his rescue, content not to hear any more.

All he can tell is her tone, and the implication within it: that to talk about it would be inappropriate. That he should be shamed by it. Mortified. Why should he be? Why should he have to hide it from the girl? It’s not like he was all that much older when he started, and even before presenting --he’d still had a nice enough mouth.

It makes no difference to Fareeha. “But mum never lets me ask,” She laments, as if persecuted. “And I’m only asking.” Her eyes wind to Jesse imploringly. Trying to get him on her side. “Jesse doesn’t have to answer if he doesn’t want to.”

Angela seems hardly convinced. Her mouth opens at a harsh angle. “I don’t think--”

“Uppers.” Jesse wants to see her squirm. He wants to win over the little miss. He talks before he has a full answer. “Dopey stuff. Pills, mainly, but it used to be all sorts.” He can’t fight the smile that comes out of the side of his mouth after he says it, but tries to, taking a sip from the glass of orange juice before him. Enjoying the stifled silence from Angela, and the little miss.

She is stunned, but in a different way. Her voice is all whispery and excited to ask, “Were they dangerous?”

Jesse remembers his birthday. Coke. Whiskey. The rush of blood he didn’t recognise after Johnny’s

“Sure.” He says, sagely. “Sometimes.”

Fareeha looks in shock about now --seduced by the concept of it. The illicitness that must seem so very far from her own life. “You didn’t take them,” She asks, slowly, “Did you?”

Jesse laughs. “Only the good ones.”

The girl’s reaction doesn’t seem pleased or horrified one way or the other, but she leans forward, like despite it all, she still wants to know more to the point that she’s nearly falling out of her chair. The interest, naive though it is, feels so fierce and genuine that Jesse would be happy to tell of all of it, now, without an ounce of shame. It would clearly be to Fareeha’s intrigue. “Did you make--”

“Alright.” Then Angela is cutting in, all of a sudden, her voice declarative and sharp and dissuading. The look she’s giving Jesse, too, is tight and upset like he’s said all the wrong things. Like the girl, surrounded on all sides by mercenaries, raised and watched over by eyes that were made for rifle scopes, needs his condescension and attention.

The reminder is there: it’s not something he should talk about. Not something he should be proud of.

He can see as much in the colour of Angela’s cheeks as she swallows. “Do you mind if we talk about something else?”

Her intentions are probably good, he’s sure. Never met a lady that didn’t have his interests at heart in some way, so he tries to give her the benefit of the doubt about it. She’s probably just trying to shield Miss Amari’s girl from this sort of talk. As if any of it could sound glamorous compared to the life they’ve all got here.

After a second --a tense second, that Jesse makes them all sit in for a second, as his only prideful sort of revenge, he shrugs, easily, “Sure.” He says, mildly, around a bite of hash brown. “Sure we can.” Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Fareeha looking off like she’s disappointed by the turn of events. He can’t really say why, but can attempt to distract her, instead. “What is it you do, Angela?”

The girl across the table makes a sort of face --or maybe that’s just always how she holds it when she’s thinking, pretty but ever-so-distantly sour. “I’m an internal medicine resident.” She says.

Jesse swallows. “That like a doctor?”

The girl nods. “Very much like a doctor.”

“He sways his head. Impressed by that --genuinely. Thought maybe she was just some administrator or orderly or assistant. Looks far too wet behind the ears to have any sort of authority, and yet. ‘No foolin’? A doctor? ’” He shakes his head again, smiling just short of the point of laughter. “Sorry, I’m jus’ --jus’ a bit surprised, y’know? I mean, we could be practically the same age--”

He thinks of that as some kind of wonderful testament to the strangeness of life. About, how, if he’d been in a different time or place or maybe if his mother had stayed in Tennessee and not New Mexico maybe he’d be something like a doctor by now, with all that education and respect, and maybe Angela would be something different. Or maybe he’s just fooling himself. Maybe all of this was forged for him before any decisions could be made.
She’s the one who cuts his thought short. “How old are you, Jesse?”

His mouth quirks in an automatic response. How old d’you want me t’be? What does it matter? It’s a different time, and place. Different sort of question. He shrugs one shoulder sort of awkwardly. “Nineteen.”

Then there’s this moment --explicit only to Angela and him, where she looks at him with this utter pity. Not just at him, and not just in light of all that he’s told her. Her nose quirks like she’s trying to scent him, and then her eyes drop from his face. Lower, to the line where the table obscures the lower half of his body. She’s medical, after all, and he’s far gone enough. He knows she knows when her pity only seems to deepen.

But what she says, after some tense and awful moment, is, “Same age.” Some admission through a forced smile. Like it’s some tragedy. Sure --a tragedy that he’s here, now, and that he has Gabriel and that he’s safe and even though Johnny’s gone it’s all at least worked out. Jesse takes another drink from his glass. He tries not to think too hard about it. Focuses on eating, instead.

That seems to be the order of the day. Even the little miss doesn’t seem to have too many objections, picking away at her breakfast quite happily for all of about ten minutes. It’s enough time for Jesse to finish his own meal, and enough time for Fareeha to get up, after a certain point, bringing over the orange juice jug, and taking just long enough for Angela to sequester Jesse’s attention again.

“I apologise, for earlier.” She says, awkwardly. “I hope you don’t think badly of me for it.” He’s not sure to which event she’s referring. Not sure if he sudden kindness is some base reaction to her revelation. He’s accounted for. Doesn’t need the pity or hand-wringing of some teenage alpha. “It’s just --hard for Fareeha. She doesn’t often get to be a child.”

Jesse isn’t really sure what she means, having never really been a child himself, until Angela explains. “She spends so much time so close to violence. We try to--” The girl dips her head. “We try to give her that distance, when we can.”

It surprises him. The sort of kindness that ought to have come for him, at some point. Maybe it never did. Maybe he was denied it. But the little miss is a good kid--so good, and her mother only the better. Jesse understands, even through his stubbornness.

He nods. “I get you.”

That should satisfy the girl, but it seems there’s more she wants to say. “And between you and I,” She murmurs, looking over his shoulder to monitor Fareeha. “Your tattoo?” Jesse looks down at it, blandly. “I’d be happy to bandage it for you.”

There is so much Jesse doesn’t know of. The public statements, or the blame: the angry newssprint appropriating the white symbol plastered on all of this corridors of this place. Jesse has no idea what the mark on his arm means to these people: not the pain or the slander of it. Only his own pain. The places he used to belong. The trust he used to have.

The evening light out in the desert is funny like that: it can make anything look rose-tinted at the right time of day.

Out here, though, he thinks he’s seeing just fine. “I’ll think it over.” He tells Angela, having had more than enough to think about, really, in the few hours he’s been awake. He’s brooding over it
when Fareeha returns, with her jug of juice, pouring for them, and offering to Jesse. “No, thanks.” He says, wiping down his thighs absently. “Think I’m gonna get.”

He finds himself a lot like this, recently. Changeable. Moody. Like his morning was alright enough until it turned on a dime, and now he feels self-conscious and too present and --and wrong. It’s all of the things Angela has said, and it’s all of that noise in the back of his brain that feels hypersensitive to every whiff of an alpha he catches and every strange sort of feeling he gets when he looks at the little miss and the low and constant ache of Gabriel’s absence.

How can he --how can he stand it?

He’s not proud to leave unceremoniously. Nor proud to skirt back to his own room and nuzzle back into the sheets and sit there, in Johnny’s hat, staring all the while at the picture on Gabriel’s personnel profile. How sharp and handsome he looks, and how far away. It’s sad, how he paws at the slide, and opens the comm line after pleading with himself not to. It’s offline at Gabriel’s end --some tin can telephone, and there’s no way to tell if Gabriel will even hear him.

“Gabriel,” He murmurs to it, having gone from desperate to pathetic so easily. He doesn’t care. The idea of him hearing this makes it easier somehow. “Gabriel, if you’re there.” He sighs out a stuttering breath. “I --I miss you.”

He thinks about the child in his belly, turning it’s little somersaults, oblivious and strange, still, to him. It’s becoming obvious, now, not just in the change in his scent, but in his look, too. People have started to ask questions. He has no answers. No plan. No mate.

He looks up, again, at the stoic image of Gabriel’s face again. The hint of a mark on the man’s neck that is distinctly un-Jesse. That precedes their entire relationship.

For the first time, it gets to him.

“Forget this.” Jesse murmurs, sourly. He closes the line. He turns away in the dark of the room.

There’s nothing else in here but him. He doesn’t even have any real possessions. Jesse sort of wishes he did. That he could make it feel like home. Even Gabriel’s rooms are bare and cold: no viable nest to make, no hint of embers or the harsh gasoline of Johnny’s scent to tide him over. Old, dried blood. A few memories. Nothing else.

He thinks about the big mountain. The seam of this place. The impossibility of leaving.

He leaves the room, as it is.

Jack takes the bandage off of his neck, eventually.

Before the wound can seal. Before he can commit to washing it all away.

He isn’t thinking about Gabriel, initially. The thought pursues him at every turn, it seems, and he doesn’t have any distraction, or support. Fareeha arrives, but he catches no glimpse of her. Ana evades him --she’s probably still healing, too, and Jack doesn’t resent her for it as much as he misses her. He’d like to see her girl, if only to indulge that feeling he has almost forgotten: of joy. Appeasing something bone-deep in him that he’s buried these last months for his own sake.
But he doesn’t, and there’s no peace. Blackwatch men use the same brand of cigarette as Gabriel used to, and it makes the halls smell like the smoking section of Jack’s life, like one at an airport, where the air isn’t quite foul enough for him to leave yet -- still breathing nostalgia.

Twice a day, he’s asked about Gabriel’s whereabouts -- documents pertaining to the sting, and to the little Deadlock cowboy.

And for all of Jack’s cruelty and fury: he remembers. Gabriel, in his sheets, in their nest. The kid scattered to the dry winds of New Mexico, used up and sorry for himself on account of nature alone. He owes more to the pair of them, even in the wake of all of this, than to the dogs of the UN.

‘Classified’, he makes sure they know. ‘I have full confidence in the way the operation was handled by Commander Reyes and feel it would be a considerable waste of assets and of time to investigate the matter further.’

It’s after that he unwraps the stiff white gauze in the dim of the office. Peels it back carefully -- nearly changes his mind once or twice, but persists for the sake of it. He can redress it later, if he changes his mind again. He knows that. He knows this doesn’t mean anything, and then it’s off.

It’s raining in Belarus. The summer months there are mild, and miserable. Gabe will never be able to get his slung arm into a warm coat. He’ll shiver, like he always does, bitter and quiet, aching to smoke. It’s raining in Belarus and not far off it in Zurich, and there’s barely anything left of the union between them and the longest and best and hardest fifteen years of Jack’s life save for the faintest crescent, purple and fading like a dying star on one side of his neck.

Sentiment takes him, in that moment. And something else he doesn’t realise he is on the cusp of.

He leaves the wound to the open air.

He has a drink.

-

Twenty miles outside of Minsk, in Vitovka, cold rain pours down on Gabe.

There’s no roof to the payphone. No word from Jack. His secure comm line has nothing left on it -- nothing but some short, small voice in a message that doesn’t last fifteen seconds.

‘If you’re there’, he hears the kid whisper, ‘I --I miss you’.

Jesse gives up not long after that. The message ends in the kid’s frustration, and then there’s nothing else but cold and furious silence on the end of the line, covered by the rattle of rainwater on the hollow tin of the payphone roof. Some pre-war artefact. He’s surprised it even works -- surprised deeper by the kid’s words.

He listens to the message once through. Twice -- four times. The car waits by the side of the road. The cold is already in his bones before he packs it in: stuck on it. Of Jesse’s voice. He tries to picture the kid as he’d left him. Bonafide, now, in uniform, neat and precious. Capable without Gabriel’s intervention.

Jack’s like that, too.
Difference is, he never made any secret of that.

He doesn’t see the little miss or her mother the day after that. Not for a few days, actually, and after the strangest of realisations. Alone, he takes his breakfast apprehensively, unsure of who to talk to, long-sleeved and shy. He doesn’t want to be looked at too hard on any of these days. He feels anxious and boxed-in, anxious at the lack of Gabriel, and the lack of explanation. Apprehensive at the proximity of any alpha.

Angela approaches him slowly, as if trying not to startle some wild thing. And a good thing, too. So lost in thought, he hardly sees her coming.

“You don’t mind if I join you?” She asks, gently.

Jesse tries to right himself. Looks up at her and sees no threat --and no stereotype he can place. Angela is difficult to categorise in any way he knows: gentle in her demeanour, light and friendly with this edge of firmness that seems more out of rehearsal than nature. There’s no hardness to her. No cruelty.

“Sure.” Jesse says. He takes his feet off of the seat in front of him, and she sits. She’s pretty, he’ll give her that, in that refined and fragile sort of way he still isn’t used to. Too light and soft for the desert. There are no marks of sun on her. No dirt beneath her fingers. “You aint got no patients t’see to?”

She brushes a bit of hair from her eyes. She ought to just tie it back. “Not today.” She tells him. “It’s a research day.”

“Oh.” Jesse says. He feels dim about it all. It doesn’t help that he has a headache. The niggling worry in the back of his brain won’t leave him be, even though it is ever-so-slightly tempered by that powdery, violet scent. He thinks maybe if it were a little bit stronger, he could relax, but the proposition seems untowards. Angela isn’t that kind of a lady. “Takin’ it easy, then?”

Angela’s mouth quirks in some sly smile. She takes a small mouthful of some kind of cereal. Swallows before she speaks: the picture of refinement. “Something to that effect.” She tells him. In front of her is cereal, again, beige and bland to the look. It seems a habit. “Fareeha has been asking all sort of colourful questions about you, you know.”

Jesse doesn’t know how to read it. It doesn’t sound explicitly like an accusation, but Angela had hardly been happy to hear the little miss so curious initially. Unsure, he ducks his head. Looks down at his sleeved arms that hide the source of the original question. Some teamster he’d been --Jesse never really did hurt anybody. Never caused no overdoses on anybody else. Never even hurt the guy he shot, either.

There’s a death that would’ve been painless.

He tries not to think about it. Just says, “Nothin’ too unt’ward, I hope.”

Angela looks at him. He only realises she’s smiling after she’s spoken. “Not untoward.” She notes.
“Certainly curious.” Her head shakes. Her hair is pretty. Jesse’s never seen a natural blonde like her before --supposes he recalls the blonde in the interrogation room: the pretty thing, but never a lady before.

He’s not thinking of anything at all, and then she says, “She likes you, you know.”

Jesse’s head raises. “Miss Amari?”

Angela smiles again. Takes another delicate bite. Jesse realizes he’s only ever had violet candies, and never seen the flower. “Fareeha.” She explains. “Although the Captain is equally fond, I think. You are her pet project, right now.” Her eyes scan the room like she’s looking out for Miss Amari. Like this is something that’s shared between just them, too, and it only occurs to Jesse after a good few seconds that he’s never really done this before. Johnny had years on him. Gabriel does. He’s never talked for this long and this easily with somebody so close to him in age. For there to be no transaction or implication to it.

The realisation is strange. It makes him smile anyway.

Even when Angela’s eyebrows raise after she take another meek bite, sighing, “I’m almost jealous.”

“Oh?” That grab his attention. “She awkward ‘bout your designation, or--”

From the way she reacts, it seems like the suggestion is impolite, or at least inappropriate. Jesse can’t tell if it’s the implication that Miss Amari should be threatened, or if it’s just rude to talk sex designations at the place and time people eat.

Seems like there’s more of a story to it with the way Angela leans in. Oh, but I eans in --like they’re co-conspirators. Like she trusts him. Like they’re friends. “No, it --it’s not that.” She says, and then looks off, sadly. “I, uh --part of my work here is internal medicine, and I am often assigned patients long-term.”

Jesse thinks he’s in on it. “She yours?”

He’s not. “Not her.” Angela shakes her head. “The Strike Commander --Jack. You know him?” The name rings some small and distant bell. Jesse can only think of the blonde. He can’t place the name enough to say with any real certainty. So he just shakes his head. It doesn’t seem to hinder Angela any. “They’re very close.” She explains. “You can imagine how pleased I was, initially. I thought it would be good for my work here, to be assigned somebody so important.”

Jesse watches her face when she talks. Her world is so different from his. Even this part is fascinating for him to spectate. “What’s bad about it?” He asks her --just as eager to facilitate as he is curious.

Angela looks momentarily forlorn. Her lips purse. “I suppose I’ve become the face of his grief, really.” She attempts some laugh at it, but it comes out stilted. Guilty. “In a way,” She murmurs, and then her voice sort of trails off. Jesse wants to press her.

“Y’give him bad news?”

Angela’s seasoned expression says it all. “Almost constantly.” She says, breathlessly. “It’s only ever bloodwork, but it’s always --always such terrible news.” The weight of it seems to show, then, and for a second she look wronged, and tired. She looks out across the room again. “I don’t think it buys me any favour with Captain Amari.” She mumbles. “Or Reyes, for that matter--”
Reyes.

Jesse’s mouth goes to open. “Gabriel--”

“Jesse!”

There’s a sudden sensation of contact on his upper back, and he turns, suddenly startled to death by a familiar voice. Right behind him, and having made no noise to ease his fright, is the little miss, now returned from her absence and standing there with a hand on his back, eager and sweet.

Jesse thinks he could deflate from the sudden spike and drop in energy. He doesn’t.

Instead, she turns, and as he does, she straightens all proper and cocks her hand in a little salute like he’s deserving of it. The little miss does it every bit as proper as the first time they’d met—even now, after she’s seen his tattoo, and even now, after she’s learned about what he is. He recalls what Angela had said--about how Fareeha expressed at some point that she likes him --and he realises he’s sitting there in silence.

So he ruffles her hair, just to spoil it, giving her a smile. “Hey there, little miss.” He says, easily. “Y’wanna join us?”

The girl shakes her hair --the mess of her hair shaking a little at the motion. “I’ve already eaten.” She says, properly. “And mum says I can see Uncle Jack.” She looks at Angela is if in apology, or disappointment. As if promising a raincheck with her sweet expression. “I’m here to fetch you.”

The word is punctuated with a prod in the upper arm. Jesse shakes his head. “Me?” The little miss nods. “Well, ain’t I looked over real nice. A messenger an’ everything.” That seems to tickle Angela more than the little miss, who covers her mouth discretely as if to hide her smile. “What y’fetchin’ me for?”

Fareeha’s mouth makes the words so elegantly. With such poise that Jesse doesn’t think he’s ever had. Least of all with his clothes on. “Marksmanship assessment.” She tells him. “I’ll help you to find the room.”

He wipes down the front of his pants in a gesture of finality. “I ‘ppreciate it.” He says, mildly, standing up. “Place’s like a damn maze.” As he goes, he hears Angela laugh behind him, gentle and polite, and he turns to give her some sort of look. “What?”

She swallows. Feigns innocence. “It’s really not so complicated.” She says.

Jesse shakes his head. “The hell it isn’t.” He says, despite the smile. “Mezzanine rooms? East wings?” his eyes roll. “I’ll tell ya, I never had anythin’ a’ that sort back at the motel.” He nods to her, anyway --would tip his hat if he were wearing one in some parting gesture, but can only see her off like that before the little miss is marching the way.

She leads the way, and he follows, only getting the benefit of her face once they’re out of the busy room and into a bright corridor, where she twists to ask him, with full curiosity, “You lived in a hotel?”

Jesse doesn’t really want to risk his last modicum of reputation. He shrugs. “Sure.”
That just about dazzles the girl. “Wow.” She says, full of genuine pleasure. She takes a left, and he follows, catching up to her level and watching her expression shift as she seems to take it in. “That must have been so much fun.” She looks up at him. “Did you have room service?”

Jesse thinks of the busted ‘no vac’ sign out back. The oppressive wall of red rock that kept him from ever leaving. Blood stains on sheets. The sweet and hot stench of burnt cocaine and heroin. Empty bottles. Thin walls. Daytime television and the harsh, unyielding scent of brute alphas chewing tobacco. Jesse thinks he was the room service in that sort of hotel. If there were a three course meal, he’d’ve been dessert.

But what he says is, “Somethin’ like that.”

She seems to consider before she speaks again. “Did everyone in the gang live there?”

Jesse thinks about the few miles stretch of dry prairie grass between the walls of his place and the outer reaches of the small town. “No,” He shakes his head. “They was all scattered about, really.”

It seems to stun the little miss into silence for another few minutes. They take another corridor on the right, and then along straight towards an elevator. She calls for it, not him, and it’s only once they’re inside that she seems to be able to pipe up again. But not before looking him over, however, her eyes gliding over the space of where his tattoo is, and then, more worryingly, over the slight and present distention low at his stomach that doesn’t suit the rest of his sinewy form.

“I have never met anyone like you before.” She says, quietly a little mystified.

Jesse holds a lean. He thinks of the girls on the bunny ranch. Miss Marie’s other boys. “Well, thanks --I think.”

Fareeha turns to look up at him, then --at his eyes with even more earnestness and sincerity that Jesse hardly knows what to do. “I mean it as a compliment.” She tells him, a little heavy-handedly. He tries to believe it. “I hope you don’t mind me asking about it.”

Jesse’s head cants, slightly. “It?”

“Deadlock.” She says --oh, but how she says it. As if to rhyme with scum. “I didn’t know if you were one of the bad ones.”

Is he? Jesse doesn’t want to think of himself as some victim. He wasn’t helpless to it. He’s made his own calls. Joined up to them. Played lookout. Shot his gun. Kept their pills in rotation. It’s like Gabriel said --he could have done something else. He could have left. He just --just chose not to.

Chose to be a couple hundred dollars short of a train ticket. Sure.

“I don’t know if that’s simple.” He says, eventually, by way of a reply. They continue to descend and he wonders about it. If good people can do bad things and still be good, or if the mark has him branded for life. That he’ll always be --polluted, in some way. Gabriel isn’t an angel, sure. He’s killed men, and Jesse stills thinks he’s good.

The best, really. Johnny, though? He’s somewhere in between.

He hopes that’s the end of it, until the girl starts to shuffle a little uncomfortably, looking up and away from him in equal turns. Jesse doesn’t have all that much more to say about Deadlock. He
knows he’ll try his best at patience, but really, wasn’t coming here supposed to be about getting away from it all? Instead of exhuming the grave out of disrespect.

As always, however, the little miss surprises him. “There’s something else I want to ask you.” She says, nervously. Jesse thinks about cigarettes. “But I don’t know if it will --if I’ll upset you, by asking.”

It’s so considerate, and gently put. What a damn novelty. Jesse almost can’t help but laugh. “Only one way to find out.” He says, nudging her playfully. It doesn’t seem to appease her much.

“Oh,” She says, a little absently, before giving him another heavy and serious look. The girl is full of them. “But you have to promise me you won’t get upset.”

That makes Jesse laugh even harder. “How can I promise somethin’ like that?” He asks her, with some easy smile. “Hell, even if I did --y’might ask me somethin’ real awful, and then I’d a’broken that promise I made.” He watches her face as he says it, dropping from curiosity to disappointment like she’s sure it’s a ‘no’. But by now Jesse’s curious, too, so he sighs and says, “Better t’just ask me anyway, little miss.”

She doesn’t react, at first. Just scans to see the floor they’re in, going into the sub-terra where the armory and range are, looking almost frustrated. Jesse wonders if it’s something he’s said. He never knows how to make himself around the girl, young as she is, and conscious of what Angela had said. About that distance --of giving her a childhood.

“Awright,” He relents. “I promise, already.” With a finger, he mimes an ‘x’ over his heart.

The gesture is so basic. But it seems to put the wind back into the little miss’s sails, and she steps out of the elevator as the door opens with some kind of spring to her step. Jesse follows, only slightly slower, content to be lead. The range is only really down the corridor and to the left. He knows the way from here, but he’s not aware there’s a hurry. He’s got to hear her question yet.

“Okay.” The girl says. Leans into him like Angela had. It’s a wonderful thing, until her voice drops and she looks away to ask, “Are you --are you having a baby?”

If he knew that’s what she was going to ask, he would’ve laughed. Probably wouldn’t have encouraged her, either, but here they are.

His jaw is tense and shut. He has to pry it open to get any words at all out, guarded as he is. Terrified to say it out loud, still, but manages something. “It’s, uh --it’s complicated.” It’s some weak evasion. It is complicated, but also simple. Horrifyingly simple, really. At some point in the winter, he will have a baby, and that’s really the long and short of any answer to Fareeha’s question.

She’s a smart kid. He shouldn’t be so surprised --especially not since, in these last two weeks, his stomach has only grown more and more prominent.

But she doesn’t look at him any different, really. Pleased, if anything, and god knows why that is. “That’s wonderful.” She says --genuinely, too, like it isn’t an unmitigated fucking catastrophe, and instead, some blessing. “You must be excited.”

Jesse is looking off down the hall to where he knows the range is. He wishes he could get out of the situation without seeming rude. “That’s one word for it.” He says, awkwardly. Wants to be honest,
for a second. “Be a lot more excited once I know what’s gonna happen.”

She looks up at him, again, but far less excited. “What do you mean?”

He doesn’t know how to word it. But has to --has to say it out loud to somebody. He doesn’t want any damn congratulations or well-wishes as much as some goddamn guidance. He wants somebody to help him --or at least to know the full depth and extent of his own fear and dread. Right now the only thing he’s more afraid of than his own situation is the prospect of getting fixed just like before.

He wants to tell her --child or not, distant from pain or not. He can apologise to Angela for it later.

“I --I ain’t gonna be the one raisin’ a kid.” He tries to explain, awkwardly, his mouth uncooperative, his words clumsy, some small and uncomfortable laugh escaping him. “I jus’ gotta --gotta find--...” A way out? Somebody else? A way to convince Gabriel they’d be good together? It doesn’t matter to the little miss, he knows, but even just saying his piece makes him feel a little better. “It ain’t important.”

Jesse likes the cool and familiar weight of a gun in his hand a lot more than talk like this, reminded as he is of how adrift it all is. This kind of talk is so new to him: choices, options. The weight of feeling. Miss Marie would have had him fixed in an instant, with no regret or remorse, and Jesse would never have had these conversations.

But here he is, feeling awkward and too-small in his own skin before a child.

A child with all of the power in the world to press him for details further --but who lets him be in some display of strange, sweet mercy. “You have an assessment to take.” She says. Back on proper form. Letting them both forget the awkwardness of it, Jesse wishes he could articulate his appreciation more than by just ruffling her hair again, trying to seem blasé once more. Easy and playful. “It’s just down the end of the hall.”

Jesse looks down the corridor again, nodding. “Awright.” He says, by way of parting. “I’ll see y’again soon, little miss.”

Fareeha smiles to him. “I hope so.” She nods. Turning on her heel to go back towards the elevator, but pausing like there’s something bothering her. Something left unsaid. Jesse doesn’t note it, already halfway down to the armory. Doesn’t note it at all, in the end. He goes to the far door, where instructions are already waiting for him, and the little miss turns back to the elevator to select Uncle Jack’s floor.

She had wanted to thank him. For not treating her like a child. But she leaves it, for now, in lieu of her own excitement.

She hasn’t seen Uncle Jack since they picked dandelions together.

- 

Fareeha sleeps on the couch. A blanket is tossed over her. The faint rattle of gunfire from a film on the screen plays on.

Gabe will be done in Belarus any day, now. Ana will be coming for her girl any minute, now. Jack’s head and stomach feels processed as dishwasher water. He’s left her sleeping in the officer’s rec room: private and secure, where Ana can find her without them having to face one another. Doesn’t
think he could tonight. Some convulsive twist of his gut has him feeling weak.

He’s sorry for her. Sick, too.

There’s something wrong that he can’t place: a faint pain in his neck, and a weakness in his legs. An unease that makes food sound unappealing despite a hunger for something, and no thirst or need that’s so easily placeable. It’s not sorrow or loss. He knows them well enough to be sure of it. Nothing, in fact, that relates in form or feeling to Ana, or her girl. It’s something, though, he knows. Something that reminds him of Gabriel.

He goes back to his own rooms, feeling rough enough to try to attempt a shower, but only managing to get under the jet before feeling even worse. His skin feels unhappy and sensitive. The sheets, even prove too much to him, scratchy and hot, no friend to his bare skin, and he is left to lie helplessly on top of them in the dark as his head spins.

He passes an hour like that. Shaky hands try to pour drinks and only end up spilling amber liquid onto his carpet and his hands. The whiskey sits worse in him than ever before. He thinks he’ll be sick. He isn’t.

He pulls a slide up for his vitals after hours more, when sleep continues to evade him and he feels gut-wrenched and punchdrunk and dizzy. Sharp and drastic temperature, bordering on fever. Some low and distant ache in his stomach. Sickness, he wonders? The stress, breaking him down?

It doesn’t occur to him until the desire sets in. Two hours later. Daybreak threatening outside: his ability to function gone.

The pain of his neck only worsens. The heat in his form blooms, rising like a dark wave swells, and then he feels it.

The first traitorous sensation of it: of slick, hot and thick, blossoming between his legs, pooling worse as the need seems to overcome him, fully. There’s nought he can do to fight it, too late to take anything, too gone to try to force words out of his mouth to ask for sedation, or help, or Ana.

Gabe is across the universe. Jack is sprawled out in his sticky sheets, wrung out and merciless with heat, banging his head against the bedframe.

He needs. He needs.
The pager fires off. Continues to fire off. It’s been going for fifteen minutes.

But it takes twenty-five --another ten, that is, for the dampener to take any effect. Angela had injected the moment he’d been paged, and she can do nothing right now but helplessly wait before she can attend.

Just a hint of her scent would be painful for him.

It’s barely past sunrise. For anybody or anything else, she might lament this, being woken as she had been with such sudden urgency and alarm. But this is long overdue, she understands, and she’s been fearful of it since she saw Jack, standing over Gabriel’s bleeding form those weeks ago. As now he has no alpha to attend to him, still fresh from the loss of a child. It’s going to be a long and cruel heat.

All she can do for him is sedate him, and even then --heat only increases Jack’s already sky-high tolerance. She can buy him a night. Twelve hours, maybe, of painless and peaceful rest at a safe dose.

He’ll beg for more. That’s really the worst of it. To see the proudest of men twist and shiver like she knows he will, clinging to her white coat. She can’t do anything for him, and never could. She’s not sure which pain is worse.

Seven minutes: she sets about changing into some scrubs to ensure inertness and sterility to herself. Prepares her materials: midazolam for tonight, among a range of opioids and benzodiazepines she has to otherwise keep quiet. Seems like everyone seeks refuge in them, prescribed or otherwise.

Three minutes: she meets Captain Amari out in the hall near the dispensary.

“Is it quite bad?” Angela is nervous, still. Something about the Captain always keeps her that way, still.

“I don’t know.” Ana leads the way without much fanfare. Her walk is quick and strained: hurried with a deep sort of care. Angela remembers that, too: the way she was the one to hold Jack up like she was his last pillar of support. It must be painful --worse, still, that it’s not treatable. “But you should be quick.”

Ana is assigned to somebody else on the roster. Angela has never heard of the Captain needing assistance for heat, or sedation or treatment. From what she understands, Ana stays medicated for that sake. Having Fareeha already, she doesn’t put herself through any heats. She wants no more children, and has no mate.
And since Jack’s last blood test, Angela’s sure she’s not the only to wonder why Jack doesn’t do the same.

He must want it badly.

The south wing is quiet at this time of morning. Blessedly so: they pass by scarce few people on the way, and it cuts down the journey time considerably. No words are said on the way, or pleasantries exchanged. It’s a grim business to be sharing. There’s nothing much more to say on the matter.

The silence only grows worse, and almost shameful when they reach the hall outside Jack’s door. It’s secure, of course, but even from there Angela can scent him. A burst of winter in the near-august morning: holly, wintergreen, and sharp, mountain frost. Strong enough to be dizzying to an undampened alpha. Dangerous.

But gorgeous, nonetheless.

Captain Amari seems to be drawing a similar conclusion. She turns away as Angela uses her medical override on the access panel, but the expression her face holds is almost wistful, as if held in a familiar sort of longing.

No questions asked about it. Angela makes her way down the hall outside and then to the main door, once again fiddling with the panel. The scent is only stronger as she get closer: fresh and lovely, but ultimately wasted. Reyes isn’t here, and even if he were--...She doesn’t know the circumstances of how Jack and Reyes came to blows --but has enough intuition to see the link that’s there between Jesse, and the bandages Jack had asked for to cover his mark, and the stint Reyes himself had spent in the infirmary.

She thinks of Jesse, then --strange, raggedy little matchstick boy, blown in from the desert, reeking of dry earth and sour root and life, amazingly. Everything Jack doesn’t seem to be, in all of his cold, sharp scent and gathered nature that is, but all cruel accounts, barren.

It’s not her business.

Not her most pressing concern, either --as the override works promptly, and then the door is free to open. The medical bag in her grasp suddenly feels heavy. Nervousness returns to her. The room inside is dark, with hurriedly drawn curtains, and mess that she hasn’t seen before. Even in the dim of it, at the threshold: Jack’s pain is visible.

Angela steps inside.

At the sound of the door, she hears the swish of fabric and notes the twist of the boy in the bed. Pale enough to be visible in the dark by a mile, the long expanse of his body curled onto one side, shaking where she finds it with these unnatural twitches. The fever is likely to have set in hours ago. She doesn’t know how lucid he’ll be.

As she approaches, she can see the much more familiar signs of distress: the shock of pallor, the sheen of cold sweat. The dizzying scent of him that no doubt starts at the shine between his thighs: already slick. He must be soaking, by now, ripe and sweet and futile.

Angela’s mouth is dry. She swallows. Approaches him, slowly.
There’s no more vulnerable a time for an omega than in heat, or birth. Scentlessness will at least get her close enough to him to sedate him, but even that requires cooperation. Ana stands by only if Angela needs the help. Waits by the door with this new hesitance. Something has changed. It’s better not to ask.

She approaches the bed carefully. Jack is still liable to be wary, or sometimes aggressive, depending on the extent of the fever and delirium. Some times are worse than others. That he’s been like this for what must be hours, now, do not place the odds in her favour. Even now, Jack is still at least double her size. All he’d have to do is squeeze.

As she gets closer, she leads with one hand extended out, and a few gentle words. It would be worse to startle him. “Jack?” She asks, softly. Gently. “Jack, can you hear me?”

He responds to the words, at least. His chin tilts in her direction as if he’s searching the dim for the source of the noise, face white and wrecked with pain. His eyes are glassy and only ever open halfway, and his brow is fixed in a tight and permanent frown of pain. It must be agonising and personal as an insult. Angela wants to act quickly.

Nearly at the bed, now, she steps quietly up to the side of it, and lays a hand on the most innocuous part of his body she can see: his shoulder. Jack flinches a mile. Starts to move away from her, backwards in the sheets, winding in them. He’s boiling to the touch, sensitive at the point of contact, and out of it. She wonders how cognizant he can possible be as she extracts her hand and looks over his shoulder.

Captain Amari is still stood outside. Not even a foot is in. Angela wants this over with quickly, and alone seems like the best way to get that done.

He doesn’t say a word, though his breathing is harsh and exhausted. The fever must really be taking it out of him. There’s no fight to him, though, mostly pliant and weak, and there’s enough room on the bed for Angela to put the medical bag down at her side to open it. The proximity and noise disturbs Jack, but it’s as if he’s only half-aware someone’s there, turning onto his back and curling up in some stuttering breath.

Some sound of pain escapes him. She can see of his hands fisted in the sweaty, discarded sheets. Close to him as she is, the scent of winter and pine is heady and strong enough to make her dizzy. It’s secondary to his pain, though. The dampener leaves her head mostly clear, and allows her to see a patient in need of help instead of some sweet, half-mated thing on soft sheets.

Powerful thing. Felled giant: with his eyes squeezed shut as he pants and shivers.

“Allright,” Angela says, as she reaches into the bag for the sterile, capped shot of midazolam. The dosage is frightening, and the first time she was called to administer for Jack, her good sense telling her to halve the amount put him out for only over an hour, having him wake to the cruelty of no relief. Reyes had been in Argentina at the time: hurrying back, as always. Both men were always so willing to put the world on hold for the sake of trying.

They must have wanted it so very much.

Her hands are trembling a little. This is the worst she’s seen him in a long time, struggling fitfully, breathless and without any cohesion. The sheets are tangled in his feet, and not over his form. It’s a departure from his usual modesty that makes Angela pity him all the more as she tries to steady one of his arms to the bed.
“Alright,” She murmurs again, trying to be gentle. He’s liable to be hypersensitive at his point. “I need you to be still for me.”

Having apparently not heard her, Jack tries to turn away onto his other side miserably, coughing out some stifled whimper but offering no real resistance against her. She’s vaguely aware of him trying to say something --initially unintelligible: she writes it off as babbling until he keeps on, and she recognises words in the mess of vocalisations. “S’ --sendfor --he’s--youshould...Gabe'sgotta--”

The name catches her attention. She sees, just in the edge of her periphery, how Captain Amari’s head rises in recognition of it. Angela’s hand hesitates on the capped shot, and then withdraws as Jack feels blindly to grasp her arm with a hand. Every part of his body is burning --even his grip is molten and sweaty. “I--I need--”

Guilt bubbles to the top of her throat before all good sense. “We’ll send for him.” She says, immediately, if only to have some good news to give him for the very first time: god, she wasn’t even the one who’d got to share the news of his pregnancy, when it happened, and instead she’s here to accompany tragedy as it strikes again, allowing him to hold her as she speaks. “Until he’s here, I need to--”

Jack twists again, resisting her, his face fixed in some deep frown before his mouth opens and he coughs out another whine. “You --there’s--it’s--theshot--...” He swallows, turning his head then to find her, and opening his eyes in the relative dark as if trying to meet hers in a bright moment of half-lucidity.

He looks suddenly relieved when she brings the capped needle out of the bag, his head dropping back. He must know what’s coming.

Sighing on the end of a steaming and tremulous breath, he smiles deliriously. “The immu -- immunosupp--...”

Angela’s hands hesitate. She pauses. “Immunosuppressant?”

Jack’s delirious smile only widens as his eyes close, as if accepting some beautiful peace in spite of his great need and weakness. His hand, still clutching at her wrist, tugs her, weakly, towards the plane of his stomach. It’s a deliberate gesture, done as if in asking, and it takes her a few confused seconds of touching his sweat-slick and hot skin before she pieces his vocalisations together.

He doesn’t realise, does he? Can’t tell the difference between the clear shot of midazolam, his ticket to God, or some medication to suppress his antibodies for long enough to keep him in a state of utter vulnerability at the astronomically low chance of being able to sustain life. Blinded in this state by what he wants --has probably come to associate this familiar agony with hope.

She holds the shot there, still capped. She feels his pain for him: enough to let him believe this. The kind sort of lie: the only she has.

“Be still.” She says, softly, looking away. Uncapping the shot and ensuring there’s no air trapped inside. She holds his arm heavy, and by some miracle of his foolish hope, he abides, stilling, still huffing out there breaths and quivering in his bones, but tamer, now. Obedient at the carrot on the stick.

She feels over his shoulder, finding the place she knows best to administer intramuscularly. Wipes
the area down, as it is, dirty with sweat and undignified agony. His eyes are closed. His mouth moves silently, as if in prayer or incantation. She does her best not to notice.

There’s no sound or pain or fury to it. The needle is sweet and silent: she extracts it carefully, and moves away from his arm. Even if he continues to turn fitfully, it won’t be of any obstruction to her - -nor will it be for any longer, really. The fight will drain out of him in minutes. The drug will let him be weak: and rest: and dream of sheep for at least a little while.

Jack doesn’t turn back to her. Doesn’t say or do a thing else. He hums some noise. Already: fading, drifting weightlessly as if across some vacuum. Peaceful.

There are many vices Angela cannot claim to understand. Not the drink or the thrill of violence, not gambling or cigarettes. But the peace of opioids and barbiturates alike --the way Jack’s frown is sundered, and the rest his body is clamouring for finally arrives? There’s something to that, strong enough to suspend her judgement at the internal allegations or Reyes.

Her work here is done. She turns to look over her shoulder, for guidance from the Captain in regards to the situation. Reyes is on the other side of the world. Jack’s dosage is already high: not a solution so much as a ploy to buy him time.

But the door is empty.

As quickly as she had responded; she’s gone.

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The evening in Minsk is still light, but with some bitter chill that hides in sight. Gabe is tired of shivering with his cigarettes.

It’s darker with the cloud over: a heavy, suspenseful gunmetal grey that’s threatening something. Storm or otherwise: Gabe wonders if he’ll still be stranded out here when it hits.

As it turns out, the Mexican border is more permeable than they’d all first thought. The remnants of Deadlock, its surviving members and appropriated ‘merchandise’ have been adopted by Los Muertos. That explains the tech, but not the downers. There’s either an overlap, some switch hitter for both the Shimada and Los Muertos, or some vested interest here in Belarus.

Either way, it’s going to take more than Gabe to investigate it. He’ll be bringing this home to his best company men. Turning the heat up some more south of the border, and cutting those supply routes.

Raising horses was always the last thing he’s ever associated with Mexico. It figures.

His utility there as some covert agent is winding down. He’s scheduled to depart in two days --one and a half, if he cares enough to specify. Back to Zurich, a different kind of cold. Back to Jack.

He’s been lying in the dark thinking about it, most nights, going crazy about the time Jack s having: who’s touching his skin, who he’s been wanting to touch. Where he’s nestled to sleep. He can’t stop picturing him above Ana in their bed: the rise of his proud form to meet hers. The picture of Ana’s every dream and resentment all these years.

It doesn’t matter if he despises this, does it? Intentions are irrelevant. That Jack wanted so badly --so very fucking badly, to hurt him is the same as what he’d done in the dark with Jesse is a bitter pill to
swallow.

God, Jesse. He can’t even call that night a moment of weakness. Not when he looks at the kid and sees something so bright and unfettered. Not when he handles the cold more than once, just to hear that tenuous breath on the other end of the line.

Jack doesn’t leave word. Obsessed with silence, now. Gabe thinks it’s punishment: a sign it’s over.

So, when his hotel phone goes in the night: taken apart by him, modified, chipped to connect to his comm line, he expects something routine. News. New directives. To which front he’ll be sent next. He lets it ring once or twice initially before he picks it up. Old phones carry a novelty to him: still used in parts of the world where the crisis hit the worst.

The plastic is cold against his ear. He wonders how old the phone is. The line is clear. Not a remote connection. Likely straight from a watchpoint or outpost. Gabe knows that much before he can even tell who he’s speaking to.

There’s some initial silence. Neither end of the line wants to make the first move. Gabe is the one being called. He doesn’t feel the need to say anything, and so the silence tests him for three seconds. Maybe four: and then the veil parts.

“Extraction moved.” Of all people: Ana. Maybe Jack doesn’t want to face him yet. Jesus, maybe this is their pillow talk and he’s lying next to her, listening. Gabe hardly registers the words she’s said. “16 hours. Tarasava at 0500.”

Back to Zurich. Christ, he’s not even sure if he wants to go back. Gabe has been able to lose himself here: he’s always been able to slip into work like this. The details soothe him. A welcome distraction from things he’d been ordered away from. A healed arm doesn’t mean he’s any more ready: Jack could break it twice as quickly as the first time if he wanted to.

Hotheaded. Hurt: but never foolish. There’s a reason for all of this. Gabe has to ask.

But he doesn’t, in the end. Some mysteries solve themselves.

“Angela is seeing to Jack.” The voice is disembodied. Mournful. The words are never said, but Gabe understands, all the same. “He won’t be out forever.”

It’s been long overdue, his heat. The SEP took away any regularity they had years ago: and Gabe knows intimately how intense and painful they are for Jack. Only worse, he understands, after pregnancy, birth or no birth. Some cruel trick of nature --insult to the injury in that no amount of heats will ever yield anything.

Jack should know better, after all these years. Should have given up and put himself out of his misery. Opted out of the losing score by way of sterilisation.

But then, Jack’s never been good at knowing when to fold. Always has had that charm of the determined. He’ll keep the faith if it kills him. He’ll always believe, on some level, that it’ll happen.

Gabe used to love that. Used to cling to it.

Now?
“Why don’t you see to him?” He asks. There’s nothing to his voice but emptiness. He spills the void down the line. “I’m sure you know what he likes by now.” There’s a pleasure to that --the very idea of it. For all of her heart and her every intention, she can’t lessen his agony an inch. Can’t save him. Never could.

And no matter how much Jack aims to wound him, or hates him, or sends him away in all his infinite wisdom and spite: Gabe is the only thing that can save him from this. The only thing that can soothe him through it.

Ana’s silence is telling. Does it hurt her? Does she feel how it feels, now?

Her silence ends, though. It has a natural limit. “He’s in pain, Gabriel.”

Gabe thinks of the scent of evergreen. Of how Jack is in heat: bright with the sharp scent of frost, red all the way to his chest with flush, teary and overwhelmed. His feverishness --how every point of contact is molten, sensitivity heightened to dizzying levels, and how cowed Jack becomes by the barest hint of Gabriel’s scent. Two or three days of it.

It seems like some kind of chap manipulation until he hears a tremulous sigh on the other side of the line as Ana says, by way of admission, “He asked for you.”

That gives him pause.

“What?” There must be some mistake. Some lie of Ana’s. That she remains there, with Jesse --with the kid who serves as living proof of Gabe’s indiscretions, and Jack has some feverish whim to ask for Gabe after doing his very best to hurt Gabe just as badly as he’d been hurt is a joke. Jack has more pride than that, surely. More resentment in him left to burn.

He wouldn’t let Gabe lay a hand on him right now. Least of all come into his bed, and master his vulnerability to hold him softly and fuck the pain away.

Would he?

“Sixteen hours.” Ana reiterates, sounding short, and terse. It’s something that differs from resentment --from years of frustration and jealousy. Maybe it’s the clip of worry. That she’s so close to Jack, listening in to his misery like a party she’s hearing through the wall; uninvited. That, for all her posturing and years to his aid, she can’t help him.

Ana’s voice is small, but stern. “Be ready.” She says, and Gabe almost pities her. Almost.

But there’s too much on the both of their sleeves for it to be that simple.

“Understood.” He says, and he leaves her at that. So much the better: the line dies. Ana has no goodbyes to say. No apologies, either. Maybe they’re both sorry. It doesn’t bear mentioning now, though, he supposes.

He can’t shake the image of Jack, years younger --fourteen years younger, stretched out on sticky calico sheets, twisting and gasping, the very picture of agony. Every time is some shade of the first: terrifying and intimate. Some sensual struggle of power and control.

He can picture Jack the same, now. Older --whiter, grasping out in the bed they used to share, and asking for the exact same thing. Asking for his alpha.
The image lies besides him for the rest of the night. Haunts his waking, and prevents his sleeping.

At least they’re sharing a bed again.

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Angela’s pager doesn’t go off again.

Nobody knows when the twilight sleep breaks. Nobody is told.

But Jack squeezes twelve hours out of the shot, somehow, exhausted too much to resist. And at the thirteenth hour?

His bed is empty.

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Gabe’s is, too.

Four weeks. Jesse didn’t even know it would be four hours. Because Gabriel was there --and he said nothing of it, and did nothing different. Came looking for Miss Amari, and then by morning, he was nothing but a rumour. Some whisper of off-site.

Sometimes, between his visits, Jesse used to think on him. Used to thrill at some knocking on his door at the hope of it. Made foolish by the presence of some brute looking to get out of his mind and find some warm, wet place to sink in to. Thinks he’s cursed by the fortune of it: angry at Gabriel beyond belief for the departure. For leaving him here alone --like this.

And terrified beyond belief, too: enough that he’d forgive Gabriel in an instant if he’d just --just come back.

But he hasn’t. There’s no word from him. Here, the world continues to turn. Clouds swarm and obscure his view of the great, white mountain and all of the other vile peaks. Miss Amari comes and goes with her lessons and expertise, with the Little Miss in tow: and as more and more time passes, she serves as much as a grim reminder as she does a breath of relief.

He’s running out of road. And he knows it.

There’s nothing to be done. Miss Amari is --absent, at best, distant and melancholic, and in no place to be asked of anything. The Little Miss is too small to yet know how to help, wise for her years, but even then: Jesse wonders how much of the admiration in her eyes would dull if she knew the full story. Angela is well-intended, but stretched thin, as it is, and there’s some tiny splinter of disdain in her. Some pity.

And Gabriel’s bed is empty and unmade and Jesse’s only real connection left. He’s no counsel to seek. Nothing to do, really, so he smokes in Gabriel’s en-suite bathroom with the door closed and the showerhead running. He’s not supposed to, he knows, but who here is going to stop him? There’s nobody to notice. The stillness in Gabriel’s spaces pervades.

He found a few nameless ludes in the footlocker at the end of the bed. Not the one’s he’d sold, nor anything related to Deadlock. Enough dust had collected over it that Jesse can assume they’ve been
forgotten about. That maybe Gabriel didn’t need a fix quite a much as it’d seemed. He leaves them be: not interested, scared to hold them too long and become forgotten himself, dusty and pale.

Maybe that’s why he takes the refuge of smoking: it makes him feel closer to God. Remembers handing Gabriel his cigarettes. Remembers watching the other man smoke, and how he looked about it. Cool and detached, like always. There’s a faint hint of it in the hoodie he’d left. Jesse tells himself he wears it because it’s that much colder here (somehow reminiscent of white winter), and not because catching the remnants of ashes eases him solely.

Not because it obscures his form enough that he’s not drawn to the blood of the matter, and the worrying. He doesn’t recognise himself anymore. He wonders if Gabriel will.

Does his face look softer? It’s hard to tell, where he’s sat on the edge of the bath (but a bath, that’s what they’ve given Gabriel, where Jesse has some narrow shower cubicle). It doesn’t help that the mirror is all kinds of steamed up. He has to get up just to wipe a stripe down and look at himself: doing it with the hand that holds the cigarette and creating an elaborate zig-zag of smoke in the air.

He’s only just found his own eyes, looking into them and through them all at once --when he hears the hiss of the door, and the soft chime of the access panel.

He drops the cigarette in the soapcatch immediately. Gabriel?

He can hardly see the door and the handle through the mix of smoke and steam, even as he scampers forward with some supreme hurry. It’s almost light-hearted and childish --instantly-forgiving and enthusiastic beyond belief. What do these last weeks matter, if he’s back? If Jesse finally has something to anchor himself to?

Terra Firma, he thinks. Scorched earth --he works the handle open and takes a step back into the bright cold of the dark room, the fresher, emptier air as crisp as his lungs can handle, and he’s breathless but to search the dark. To find a large form wilting at the foot of the bed.

“Gabriel--” Jesse’s mouth works before his head. He takes another step closer, eager to search for some familiar scrap of scent. For the nostalgia of forest fire.

But the form on the bed seems to merely collapse, and Jesse realises it, then, as the air clears and his dulled senses begin to work again. There’s no forest fire here. The bright, dangerous heat of summer is far from this place. There’s no Gabriel. Nothing for him here, but heady, sensuous winter: something as essential and salient as the peak of the tallest, whitest mountain.

There’s an undercurrent there that he’s almost missed. Something he’ll recognise all his days: desperation. Need. Heat.

Jesse stays half in and half out of the room. Frozen, unable to see well in the dark enough to know who he has found himself with, or why. Gabriel has left him access to the set of rooms, damask as they are. That must mean anybody can get in. Must mean that the poor sonuvabitch squirming in the sheets is just --just lost.

Jesse’s sympathy blinds him. His mind, in its finite wisdom and naivety, doesn’t call Gabriel into question. Mediated to distraction by his own changes: the instinct to trust his alpha that partners so beautifully with his familiarity with the scene. With how instant and sincere his pity is for the omega on the bed, disorientated and hopelessly helpless. Competition no longer occurs in the same way, Jesse’s sensitivity to it dulled by the security of pregnancy.
There must be enough of Gabriel left in the room, in traces, that the poor bastard had crawled towards the nearest scent of relief. But Gabriel’s gone, and the last damn spec of his scent is in the fabric of the hoodie Jesse’s wearing.

So, he supposes, it’s up to him.

Getting further into the room isn’t the difficult part. Jesse is no threat. Still, he skirts the wall until he’s fully inside, only really able to watch, trying to give the other omega space to achieve some semblance of comfort. That much, he knows is important: trying to find some balance between cover and dignity despite how coarse sheets feel against oversensitive skin. By the scent and look of it, heat is in full stride, and by now his nerves are like to be on fire.

Jesse thinks the scene is all so familiar until he realises that what he’s hearing --and he only realises the presence of the noise when he’s fully in the room --is not some fitful complaint, borne of discomfort. It’s --it’s tears. The stranger is crying.

He hesitates --then, caught exactly between the bed and the main door.

Shouldn’t he leave? To get Miss Amari, or Angela, or just about anybody else who might know what best to do? It’s not like there’s all that much Jesse can do for him as he is. As they are, and yet, when he looks towards the door, and the shape of his body follows, he realises he’s turning his back towards the sound. And it reminds him of his own agony, of lifting his beet-red, heavy head as he was fucked into for the millionth time, tingling with heat, pliable and sensual from ludes, tears in his eyes as he begged Miss Marie for just one knot.

He turns back towards the dim and squirming figure. No pride --or friend. And he sure as hell don’t look like any of the other omega’s Jesse’s seen in his time: not like him or Miss Marie’s girls on the bunny ranch. His form is too built, broad as a train, tall enough that even curled there’s a lot of him.

But the differences are cosmetic, really. He’s no different as Jesse in this position, turning fitfully on his back to show his belly. Twisting his head up in the dim light, and as far as Jesse can see, there’s no mark there. No dark semi-circle that speaks of help to come.

And he remembers Gabriel’s eyes on him, at the high side. How he’d stood there, with all the power in the world to intervene, and to help --and how he’d walked.

They aren’t the same.

“Shit,” Jesse murmurs, but he makes his move.

Slowly, away from the door, towards the bed in slow movements not to startle the guy any worse. The darkness is thinning as he adjusts to it. Thin rays from between the hinge and the bathroom door spill out into the room, and as he comes to sit on the edge of the mattress, and white-hot strip falls across the stranger’s eyes, and Jesse sees some much blue, so suddenly, that he doesn’t wonder if he hasn’t found Johnny’s eyes in another man.

The eyes are unfocused, though --swimming with fatigue and pain. Jesse recognises that, too. Looking for some hint of relief. It occurs to him, then, to try to provide some, sitting up to shuck the hoodie off over his head. It’s the only thing that’s got a bit of Gabriel left on it, the last strains of ash faint on the fabric, but there. Without it, he can war with his nesting instincts --got to bother Angela, distract himself. He’s not the one who needs it, right now.
So he moves it toward the omega on the bed who swallows, thickly --audibly, like the scent is somehow painful. He takes it, too, though, curling around it, burying his face. The relief is visibly instant, but bittersweet.

“Aright,” Jesse says, then, just for something to say. To try and talk himself into feeling in control of the situation. He’s never been on this side of it, before. “That’s --that’s better.” It seems to be. Now the other man has something to focus on, at least, even if there’s a fruitless and half-aborted jut in his hips. A damn jacket isn’t exactly a substitute for treatment.

Jesse can’t do much for him. But there’s more than this, at least.

He rises, then, going back towards the harsh strips of light that tell of the bathroom. Smoke pours in on the lines of light, skating them, and it looks dreamlike. The cigarette is still burning in the misty room. The showerhead is still humming. The disconsolate air within it is self-contained: Jesse can see past it into the cool darkness of the other room.

His head is still spinning from the force of the omega’s scent. Bright as a menthol cigarette, but more organic. Something about it feels so familiar --but Jesse can’t place it.

He wonders if the similarity is merely emotional.

In the room, he leaves the cigarette to burn itself out. Turns off the shower. Takes the glass by the sink and rinses it with cold water, before filling it. He never liked to dry-swallow pills, and even if the ludes for him, he figures to extend the courtesy.

He pushes the door further open when he comes back into the bedroom, and the wider door better pierces the darkness. The thick of it thins to some kind of lilac: he can better see the disarray of the other omega. Snow-capped blonde sweat-plastered to the man’s brow, mussed from turning over and over like somebody rolling over in their grave. Like an engine failing to start.

It’s only by the right angle that Jesse even recognises him --remembers the itch of a prison jumpsuit, and tight nerves in his stomach that he thought was loss, and not a child. The blonde: pretty thing, tall, and handsome and imperial. So above-it-all with how he’d looked down the column of his nose at Jesse and how he’d thought he was above his own designation.

Jesse doesn’t really enjoy cruel ironies. There’s no joy in the one of seeing him helpless in the bed.

There’s even less joy, Jesse realises, in the migration of scent. Its months ago that they met, and the blonde --he’d been rich and gentle in scent: not of some invincible winter, but of spring frost. Life. Had Jesse made some error in judgement, at the time, or--?

There had been a mark, too, he remembers, on the column of his neck that looked so pretty. Pretty enough to be envied. The two aren’t necessarily related. People change their minds all the time --get fixed, feel differently, and outgrow the people who keep them. But people lose things, too.

Jesse only hopes the man on the bed has lost his mark and his baby out of choice: sacrifice, and not loss. Because loss is painful --shameful, and Jesse’s been telling himself he’s made all his choices his whole life: about Gabriel, about hustling, about being here, or getting fixed. That what he does matter. That he can --can escape all of this, somehow, if he tries hard enough.

Because sacrifice, and choosing, is kinder than the loss of having no choice at all.
It’s strange to recall the meeting, now. Commander. Jesse remembers that, too. The form on the bed, clutching desperately to some meaningless jacket, doesn’t look like any commander Jesse has ever known. But what does he know? The title isn’t some protection from anything. Ivory towers are no stronghold from the cruelty of things.

Fancy title and a long coat, sure: but it’s still an omega as any other, suffering in the sheets.

Jesse does the only thing he knows how. He leaves the glass of water on the nightstand. Goes to the footlocker at the end of the bed, and roots around the inside until his fingers settle on the tacky, dusty plastic of the ludes bag. Forgotten, allegedly. Gabriel never struck him as the careless type. There’s a lot he doesn’t know.

He takes two. Settles on three after a moment of deliberation, even though that’s supposed to be the easy part.

The hard part comes as he puts a knee on the bed and tries to climb onto the mattress pad. Leans heavy on one arm to try to alert the other man, gently. So as not to alarm him. “Hey,” Jesse murmurs, swallowing. “C’mon, look sharp.”

Blearily, in the better-seeming dark, he finds blue again, Johnny blue, beautiful waters like some head in the pacific, where bean green pours over blue. There’s some much pain, there. Some much of something: some intensely-felt emotion that has clarity beyond the haze of delirium, and Jesse almost wishes he know the man better to identify it.

But he doesn’t --so he sits, and offers the three white pills with his best intent. “This’ll ease ya.”

The words don’t seem to go in at first. The blonde continues to look at him, almost furiously, even if his eyes aren’t quite in focus. Stares down the pills in the same way. But then the expression gives way --falters to weakness. A faintness of expression. The pills get scooped up clumsily by a hand. Jesse turns away to get the water.

The blonde uses the whole glass to get the pills down. Jesse leaves it by the bed, empty, catching stray rays of light.

The scene is strange: Jesse stays, for whatever reason. Maybe he feels responsible. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to leave the last piece of Gabriel he has, and so he sits on the bed, back against the headboard, one hand absentely clutching at one of the hoodie sleeves that the other omega clutches to desperately. He thinks he’s been here, in the dark before. Or, at least --somewhere very familiar.

He still can’t place where he’s scented this winter before. Only that he knows he has.

The ludes take fifteen minutes to work as a sedative. You’re not supposed to let the knock you out -- waste of a good pill, really, because all the fun begins after the sedative effects are in full-swing, but Jesse has enough mercy and good sense to know when to leave well enough alone. He doesn’t bother the other omega: lets him squirm and try to rut against anything solid without complaint. Rather ride the wave than drown in it.

He thinks about taking one or two for himself. It’s some moment of weakness, looking at the bright, clean-looking pills spilling out onto the wood of the nightstand looking like snowdrops. He’s had nothing but cigarettes since the sting. No good narcotics moved through the County lockup. There’s nothing, here, and even the smell of nicotine on his clothes earns him this cold, funny sort of look
from Miss Amari.

Truthfully, he gets halfway to reaching for one (just one), before it happens.

Like some butterfly tapping at the window, only --from the inside. Some slight but utterly alarming sensation, deep in his stomach that has him freezing. Jesse doesn’t want to think about it. Never did, and has been doing his best not to think about any of it: not the way that in just the four weeks Gabe has been gone his given uniform no longer fits, or how heavy his chest feels or how terrified he is to be left here like this; unmated. Alone.

He looks away from the pills hopelessly, feeling sick down to the marrow in his bones. Looks back towards the blonde, resting in the bed. But the mercy of sleep has already claimed him.

Jesse looks down at him, for a few seconds, and then lets out a single mirthless noise. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” He says, for his own sake.

He leaves the ludes at rest.

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It takes four hours to get from Tarasava to Zurich.

Gabe should be relieved to be heading back. Should be glad: he’s served his term. His punishment in the east middle of nowhere is over, and he can sleep in his own bed and walk without watching his back and he can assess the damage of things he left. Should be ready to come back, after healing up in his time away, his arm sling-free, the cuts and bruises of his face mostly faded, and his ribs more of an afterthought that dissuades laughter than a real injury. He should be relieved. Restful.

But he gets no single ounce of rest, or respite.

He has never enjoyed Jack’s heat. Never liked to see him in pain, to begin with. To see this proud, infinite being reduced to something he has always been so above never suited him. Didn’t like it any more after being mated, when it became less of a sympathy and more of an obligation --some preposterously heavy responsibility that he never shouldered well.

Over the years, he wonders if he hasn’t begun to associate it with pain. Disappointment. If that’s why he fears even the barest hint of Jack’s scent as he waits in the limbo of transport. If it’s that, and not the other Fear, of Jack and what he’d do to Gabe. Of how in every conscious element Jack probably despises him, and doesn’t want Gabe’s hands anywhere near him and least of all on him while the tinge of his blood begs for it.

There’s something there still of the mark, then. Something that remains. Gabe used to have all of him. Most, for years, and some for these last few. He thought there was nothing between them, now.

He thought wrong.

He feel the same way he did rushing over to Zurich, shrapnel in his bones, trying to prevent the winter from descending upon the dry and vast desert (where it most certainly doesn’t belong). God hope things are different, this time.

It’s deep evening when he arrives: indigo, the storm of Minsk having followed him. The rain pelts him hard as he moves from the runway and gets into his bones. He sees snow-capped mountains in
the distance, inaccessible from here, but still salient, and beautiful. A kingdom he’s locked out of.

But inside is drier, and safe, and warm. He comes upon one of the west hangars, sodden and
trepidation, still, shaking out the damp as he contacts Ana, first, to let her know he’s here. He’s had
enough time to ruminate on what she did. That Jack asked --that she’s gained nothing from it but
misery, her devotion and desire rewarded at both parts by the cruelty of intention. There’s not
forgiveness, really, but the beginnings of understanding.

The hangar is dustier --or smokier, than he recalls upon leaving. It’s dark inside, too, the runway
lights visible, obscuring the lights of the stars behind them. The bay door is open, and while the wind
doesn’t make its way in, nor the rain, Gabe can still see and hear both. He looks out at, trying to
gather his resolve as groundstaff huddle in the rain to do the transport walkaround before moving it
inside.

The dense cover of grey cloud looks heavy and quilt-like. Looks like it’s being pulled towards the
earth, soon to be pierced by the peak of the largest mountain on the range that overlooks the base, in
the same way that Gabe is being pulled to Jack, willing to go, wanting to help, but terrified to be torn
apart again.

Maybe he deserves it. Maybe he needs a cigarette.

The thought only occurs to him when he realises it isn’t disturbed dust in the hangar that’s making
the air thick, but actual smoke. Cigarette smoke, that makes the words of the voice behind him hand
in effulgent pallor when he realises he isn’t alone.

“I never seen weather like this so damn miserable in the summertime.”

He tears his gaze from the runway, then, caught out by the only thing he hadn’t accounted for. The
same tremulous voice like a whisper at the other end of the line. Here, so soon, as if in waiting for
him: Jesse holds a lean against a shipment crate like this is his turf. Looks tough as hell with his
cigarette out like that. All the finer makings of a gangster in him.

(Save for the thing Gabe notices most of all, even in the dark of the hangar: the shape of Jesse’s
silhouette. How these four weeks have had such a damn transformation --in the now-definite curve
of his stomach, and the presence of his chest and how utterly, utterly furious the kid looks in his
eyes).

Wildflowers have somehow taken root in the cracked and dry earth of the dusty mesa: Gabe can
smell the life in the notes of creosote on the kid --almost as well as he can smell frost, sharp. The
sweetness of years gone by. Summer is ephemeral, really. The cold permeates. In some places it
snows all year round --and people always come home.

Something in him is weak to it. The exposure is cruel. He doesn’t have the sense to ask before he
feels the beginnings of mad blood starting to stir. Much closer, or any more intense, and the smell of
Jack on the boy will kick up a rut in him.

But Jesse doesn’t seem to know that, or even to care, before he’s coming forward. Pausing, to put
the cigarette between his teeth like he’s trying desperately to hold onto it.

Reeling back and then punching, closed fist, thumb outside, connecting with Gabe’s jaw hard and
forcing him to stagger back with the force of it.
Jesse’s still slight in frame, even if he’s tall, and even if he’s filling out more, but goddamn if the kid can’t punch. The kid hasn’t lost a step since he threw that right hook in the Santa Fe County Jail, and Gabe would be proud, almost, if his mind weren’t stuck desperately on Jack, and on the mess he left here, and on the pain that blooms in the bone of his jaw immediately.

Staggered, he sees the kid suck hard on the last of the cigarette as he nurses his hand, before flicking it away and crushing it under his heel. “That’s for leavin’.” Jesse says, coldly --full of a venom Gabe didn’t know he could possess. “Four weeks without so much as a goddamn goodbye.” His chest is heaving, Gabe realises: can see the boundless and barely-restrained anger of the kid that could quickly turn into tears, or worse.

He’s had the same argument before. Never was good at making up goodbyes. Always better at running away.

Righting himself, he straightens, ignoring what will bloom to a bruise on his jaw, he lets out a breath and tries to clear his head. Tries to fight the rising tide in him: the one that wants to find, and claim and mate and protect. His cognizance is slipping.

Jesse makes another move to come forward and Gabe fully thinks he’s going to get another hook for his trouble, bracing his face with his forearm, when winter overwhelms him, sunny in its undertones, a complete contradiction as the kid grabs onto him with such ferocity. Like he doesn’t know how to let go.

The anger has dissipated: left only with fear in its wake. Of course Jesse is afraid. He has nobody here. Ana isn’t his keeper. Johnny’s in the ground. Mexico is some fever dream of the spring, and Jesse’s only gotten bigger as the confines of his prison remain consistent in size. Eighteen weeks. That’s almost halfway.

His face aches. His thoughts are becoming less tangible by the second. Wintergreen is growing stronger to him at a similar rate, pulling him back to the trail he’d started down, years ago.

Torn --trying to keep it together, Gabe murmurs raggedly, “You shouldn’t be smoking.”

Jesse’s grip doesn’t loosen an inch. “Yeah,” He says, wetly, like he’s on the verge of tears, “Really gets in the way of my yoga.”

Somewhere in the conscious part of his mind, that parts losing the battle, he knows he needs to stay with the kid. To give him some kind of plan and structure to cling to. He can’t keep leaving these people who build their lives around him when he doesn’t have the answers. Can’t leave things half-constructed. Isn’t that what he liked about Jack? What --what drew him to Jesse?

That determination, in the face of it all. To continue through a war. To get to Mexico. And Gabe has turned tail on both of them --building a fire only to let it go out.

But Jesse is clinging to him, here, and Jack is in the midst of his suffering and Gabe is losing his very grip on good, clear consciousness. He’ll have nothing to say for himself --no explanation for leaving Jesse again, so soon, when another voice makes itself present in the room.

“Reyes.” She says, in a hard tone, startling the poor kid, the end of her breath white from the sudden cold of the room. Never ‘commander’. He doesn’t reset her that. “I’m afraid you’re needed elsewhere.”
Her footsteps fill the void of space in the hangar. At the words, Jesse tears his face away to look at her, and then back up at Gabe with a reiteration of fury and defiance and --and loss. His mouth opens with some objections. “But--”

“The matter is quite urgent.” She says. For once, her hardness works in Gabe’s favour, and for once she is not his adversary, but his saviour. After all, hasn’t she looked over Jesse all of this time? Prevented Jack from further violence? Is here, at his aid, now? There’s no sign of where he’d struck her, and for that, he’s grateful. “There are things you need to attend to as well, Jesse.”

She waits there, for the two of them to part. Jesse’s hands don’t let go, though. He’s still not used to taking orders, and clings tightly to the fabric of Gabe’s clothes like a much younger child. Her eyes tell of something more complicated than pity, or jealousy, or love. Like she’s trying to convey to him how much pain Jack is in, and how, for the life of her, she can’t stand it.

Were they still in New Mexico, like before, Jesse would sooner spit at him than talk to him. His pride was so rooted in what he had, then: his looks, and his place, and his decisions. None of those things are left here. He isn’t even left with room to rightfully despise.

Slipping, still, Gabe holds him with equal measure. Murmurs to him, softly, “Jess--”

The kid swallows with some audible noise. “Yeah,” He says, again, with a wrecked voice. Like this is the part where he takes the money and bows out. “Guess you gotta--” he sniffs, too, and Gabe’s wish to hold him almost outshines the overwhelming fog of his brain, piercing it with clarity, for a second. “Gotta get.”

Ana is kind enough to chaperone him. Comes and leads the boy away, and there’s no moment of protest. If Jesse notices the change in Gabe --can tell the rut from his years of experience, he makes no display to show that, and says no words on it. He departs with Ana, and Gabe can see the change even in the way he walks.

It feels unreal to be left. Feels unreal to watch Jesse’s form disappear, ripe with growing life, only to make his own way in the opposite direction, towards an empty room he was condemned to, being waited on by his love of fifteen years, who needs him so fiercely that another second if a terrible injury, but would barely deign to look at him.

None of this can be real; he thinks he has lost his head outside of his own door, lost in some wintry forest, caught suddenly in a blizzard and unable to retrace his steps.

Part of him still clings to Jesse. To Jack --of days gone by, imagining coming inside to love, and intimacy. To lucid moments between frenzy where Jack could form enough words to hope: the foundation of their future house build on every murmurs and last look and hand on the warm, hard plane of Jack’s stomach. There were no nouns and names and dates. It was always up in the air.

And still, there’s so much up in the air. Only this time, Gabe’s only wish is that he survives the rain when things start to come back down again.
Gabriel is pausing at a threshold at the same moment, almost exactly, that Jesse does.

Miss Amari is the one who leads him; away from the cold, and the hangar, and from Gabriel. Jesse feels the sudden reunion and even ore sudden departure like an open wound, and as they walk away, he looks over his shoulder and realize that he can no longer soldier on.

For all of that kid still left who has his heart set on Mexico, he digs his heels in for the first time in a long time. He draws the line in the sand, then and there.

Says nothing, at first. Just stops his walk down the long corridor. Hell, Miss Amari doesn’t even notice for a few good strides, and she’s nearly seven feet from him before she turns around, and looks puzzled. Her face is tired, and not curious. She doesn’t want to tolerate this --whatever it is. Her mouth doesn’t quirk in any way that suggests she cares to know the root of the dissent.

She sighs. “Jesse--”

He thinks about her words at the foot of the great mountain. How she’d purloined him, there. Told him to stay. Great emancipator or prison warden? Saviour or captor?

Times like now; he can’t tell the difference.

“Jus’--” He swallows. Feels foolish, and maybe half of that’s the anxiety of being separated so quickly and carelessly from his alpha or maybe it’s just that he’s gone as far as he can go like this, but that doesn’t mean the words aren’t worthy of saying. “Jus’ hang on a minute.” His voice is unnaturally harsh. “I think I gone far enough without a few answers.”

Miss Amari says nothing, immediately. Gives him room to speak. Maybe she pities him, or something --he doesn’t know. He feels pretty pitiable as it is, kept here in this purgatory of limbo, unaware of Gabriel’s comings and goings, friendless and moneyless and anonymous, in a country he doesn’t know. None of this seems to buy him answers.

Or time: his clothes shrink; his insides feel strange and unusual. He doesn’t know what he is
“Is this gonna happen again? The --the disappearin’ act?” He reiterates the idea, trying not to sound so goddamn wounded. Trying to evoke the boy who used the longue in his sheets, uncaring or who was knocking at his door. Not noticing the weeks that passed between Gabriel’s visits to the best of his abilities. “An’ if it is, can’t I--” His care is so visible. Too much on his sleeves. He despises all of this. “Can’t I at least get some sorta warnin’?”

Miss Amari makes some expression of remorse, or maybe its sympathy, saying softly. “The operation was confidential.” She says, softly. “And we aren’t always given a great deal of notice ours--”

(Unbelievable as it is, Gabriel will get to witness her coming to his defence. But not at this time, and not at this place.)

“What is a ‘great deal a’ notice’?” It comes out sharp. Good. Jesse doesn’t care who he hurts, even if it’s himself. “Ten minutes?” He takes a step forward, even if he’s not progressing at all with this line of questioning. “Five? Two? Enough for a goddamned goodbye.” He’s halfway to yelling, and he doesn’t even notice. “Enough to say how long--”

“That’s as maybe. Miss Amari’s expression has solemnified a little. Her sympathy only goes so far. It’s not her that Jesse is angry at. Not really. “Gabriel might not have known how long he was going to be gone for.” Her voice is curt. She’s happy to repeat herself. “The operation was confi--”

“Confidential to who?” He says it through his teeth, angrier than he realises. “An’ who the hell am I gonna tell anything to, anyway?!?” That makes some furious laugh startle out of him at such preposterous a notion. That he --a prisoner here as he feels he is, is some double-agent. Like he’s smart enough to know how to play one person; let alone two.

Miss Amari’s pity dries tight up at that. She straightens and says to him, in a tone with less room for argument. “That’s protocol.”

“Fuck your protocol.” His face feels red. He sort of shouts it --he doesn’t know. It doesn’t occur to him to hide how worked up he is. “It’s some mighty fine excuse for bein’ left near a goddamned month like--” His voice cracks. “--like this.”

As if trying to act out his own desperation, he moves one of his hands down to his stomach. Big enough now that he can place his palm on the underside of it, even though the feeling makes him feel sick and uncomfortable. He doesn’t have Gabriel’s clothes to hide in anymore: and the ones he has left are growing visibly tight. They make his vulnerability known.

He feels like he’s walking around with his ankle in a hunting-trap: heavier than he should be, disfigured and unable to outrun a thing.

This was never supposed to be the hard part.

His chest is shaking a little. It’s the fight leaving him. He doesn’t think he could yell another word if he tried. He doesn’t have a thing left inside him.

Miss Amari must be able to see that emptiness --hell, recognise it, maybe. That feeling of being left behind, without use, fearing the future but unable to return to any version of before. Perhaps that’s what puts some warmth and kindness back in her eyes. What encourages her to step to the boy and
touch his shoulder, teeming with affection.

“Jesse--” She murmurs, feeling him wilt against her, slightly. She holds onto him tight, giving him the first real support she’s been able to offer in weeks.

Proud, as ever—as they all seem to be here in their own funny ways, Jesse sighs, raggedly. “Don’t,” he says, very quietly, with no friction or resistance to it. This isn’t a plea for help. He doesn’t want to be held or soothed or anything or the sort. That’s never really been the kid’s style: he wouldn’t know what to do with that kind of affection. He probably doesn’t recognise it.

“Jus’--” In recovery, so soon, he tries to compose himself quickly. “Jus’ tell me there’s a plan.” In the hall light, after the fact of shouting, Jesse looks utterly colourless with misery. “I know where Gabriel comes an’ goes ain’t up t’you --I do.” He swallows. “But y’ said you’d help me.”

She looks momentarily blank. The boy came prepared. “After the BLEAT. You said t’me that whatever I decided to do--”

“I remember.” Miss Amari says. Nods, for clarity, even if she doesn’t know how to help him. What was her grand plan before? To talk to Jack? She couldn’t so much as look at him right now. She’s still trying to outrun her shame there; it hurts, still. But this isn’t about her pain. “If your mind isn’t changed, we can start some of the paperwork tomorrow.”

It’s a single sentence full of simple words. A basic promise. Jesse stills, nonetheless. There some relief to him, and she can feel it in his form, and the way he nods, quickly, as if to assure himself. It seems all there is to it, and she goes to move: turning halfway around. Jesse doesn’t move with her.

“There’s jus’ one more thing.” he says. His voice is lower: sounds about ten years older. Ana can hardly imagine his future, and hearing it is strange.

She turns to regard him again: fearful of what she’ll hear. She seems right to be. Jesse’s eyes are on hers. Latent with anger, but something else too. Something like apprehension.

“Gabriel was gone all that time.” He says. It comes out slow. “The moment he touches down, he’s rushin’ off somewhere else.” His mouth quirks—he wants to say something else. Wants to ask about the blonde who came to Gabriel’s bed. Lost? Or returning? But he doesn’t know how to phrase it. He doesn’t know if he really wants an answer.

Instead, after a while, he swallows. “If--...” Jesse blinks. “If he was keepin’ somethin’ from me, you’d --you’d tell me, wouldn’t ya?”

Ana looks back at him without breaking his gaze.

She has no idea what the boy knows of Gabriel. What he knows of Jack --if he knows of Jack. Let alone the fight. Let alone the miscarriage. But she isn’t his keeper, even if she’s tasked to look after him. He isn’t the one who brought him here. Has never asked anything of him, nor taken anything anyway.

It isn’t her place or burden to tell him where Gabriel is at this moment in time.

Ana nods to him, once. Full of solemnity. “Of course I would.”

It doesn’t seem to be quite enough, though --and there’s this second of hesitation. Jesse remains
where he is, his head tilted, looking off to the side like he’s resigned himself to something.

But whatever it is, he doesn’t say. Merely sighs.

“Okay.” He murmurs, weakly.

And he goes without resistance.

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The room inside is dark.

It opens, suddenly, and the light from the hall paints a black shadow of Gabe’s hesitation out on the floor. For a second, he stays with it. He remains.

Inside is void to him, his eyes finding nothing meaningful in the darkness until his vision can adjust, and it does so quickly. But the second he doesn’t see isn’t lost at all: held in suspense by the heat and proximity of Jack and his scent.

Gabriel sees fifteen years: the bloody sheets of the SEP, burning rubble, fresh paint, a scar the shape of teeth, with pills down a bathroom sink. He sees longing and the loss of it, every hurt word and every fist and every intimate, auspicious touch and every line in black and white of that goddamned photograph.

And then his eyes adjust, and he sees Jack.

No fight in him --at rest, now, his eyes shut, the rise and fall of his chest slow and deep and predictable aside from the shivers. The sheets are tangled in his legs, barely covering him: his bare skin illuminated, the thin sheet of sweat catching the hall light. He’s on his side, like always, hair stuck down, head turned left. The tip of his nose buried in dark fabric, and Gabe doesn’t recognise it at first.

One of the sleeves is strewn over Jack’s collar. There’s no way to tell if the mark is still there. Jack’s face is turned away. The light is low. Gabe can’t bear to investigate.

It should be over. For all they’ve done to eachother, they’d do right to let this die. To let it all die: the retirement, the quiet houses, the children. The future, if that’s what it all ever was.

But he can’t, can he? Not here, and now, looking in on Jack, compelled to help, and called to it. Already halfway to kidding himself that they could pull something from the rubble: that he could change for Jack, even if he has a million times before and has never once been a better man for it. Even if it’s the rut boiling in his brain, and not regret.

He stirs a foot to seek a friend: stepping into the room just barely. Enough, though --that whether by noise or by scent, he hears the sheets shift. Winter blooms to a full tundra before him: Jack is shivering, still, in its midst, the pain of it visible all over him as his blue eyes scan the darkness and the white-hot light of the hall, to the shape of Gabe in the door.

There’s a second of fight in the blue of his eyes.

But it loses, almost immediately, to the haze of need that’s saturating his every sense.
Worse than hate, then, is despair. The way Jack’s feet kick at the sheets to escape them: how he’s white in the face, stuttering in these hasty and laboured new breaths. How, when Gabe comes forward and the door shuts behind him, the last rays of light catch on Jack’s thighs, and he can see the waste of slick there, already. There’s a tragedy to it that should make his heart sink --but he has no thoughts. Nothing collected at all beyond need of equal fervour.

His clothes start to feel too heavy: abrasive on the surface of his skin, and stifling.

One of Jack’s hands is grasping the sheets of the bed desperately. “Gabe,” He croaks. And Gabe doesn’t even wait to tear off his jacket before coming forwards towards the bed, knee on the mattress, at Jack’s aid immediately.

“M’here.” He says. About all he can manage, really, his thoughts cloudy, drawn to the same repetition and base instinct. His mouth is cottony and dry. He’s already hard. Mostly there, anyway. It will take mere seconds, as it stands.

Jack’s head is turned away, to the side, his chin drawn in to his chest like a boxer, and not up like it usually is. The gesture is that of defiance, and not the picture of the usual submission. He isn’t baring his neck to make his mark visible, nor inviting Gabe to mark him again --he’s hiding it.

He does it with the tips of his fingers --his last scrap of restraint left to punish Gabriel. To remind him this isn’t some blessed union or deep desire. It’s only want in the sense of wanting to be well; at any cost.

Distantly, it hurts. Somewhere Gabe is still looking down at the kid in regulation sheets, blonde and fitful, pink all the way to his chest, legs parted, neck bared, looking up with nothing but desire. He can still see the excitement --and worst of all, hope.

Jack is white. Drained, visibly, as his chest heaves. There’s no hope or light at all in his closed eyes. He makes some noise in the back of his throat. Gabe gets the meaning, more or less.

He undresses quickly --barely done when he puts one hand on the bed, and the other on Jack’ calf to steady him. To warn him about what’s going to happen. There’s still a chance for his pride to get the better of it all. He could kick out. End this.

But he pants there in the sheets and lies still. A sign to proceed. The most submission he knows he deserves from Jack right now.

He traces up Jack’s leg carefully. His hands buzz with energy: he’s all verbs right now. No connections or history or places to belong, really, but an overwhelming set of desires. Touch. Claim. Kiss. Mate. Breed. Worse when he comes upon the inside of Jack’s thigh, moving up through the wetness on the skin there, still body-warm and fresh, his insides tingling from it and from the way Jack tenses beneath him and makes a noise of pleading.

He reaches out, too, with a hand just as desperate as the noise he’s made: an iron grip on Gabe’s wrist. He’s wasting time: being sentimental when there’s no place for it. No reason for it.

Gabe can feel his insistence just as much as he can feel the heat from between Jack’s legs, and knows he shouldn’t waste another second. For his own sake. For that of mercy. For all that he wants this, too, moving his hands beneath Jack’s thighs and, in a smooth and time-old, practised motion, hooks one over his shoulder. The other moves of its own volition, half-around his waist.
The heel digs into the small of his back impatiently. It could be playful or intimate in another world. Gabe closes his own eyes for a second. He moves himself forward at the same time Jack does: entering him in one movement that’s enough to leave his head spinning and his mouth like the desert floor.

It’s not enough. One hand leans heavy on the mattress and the other holds possessively onto the narrowest part of Jack’s pretty waist as he sinks deeper, and deeper -- not even bottomed out before he feels Jack tighten around him, hot and gorgeous, coughing out obscenely all the while.

He jerks in the dark: what Gabe recognises as one of the many times he’ll come tonight, tell-tale in how Jack is constricting around his cock as if desperate not to waste a single drop of his mate. It’s over in less than ten seconds, but Jack doesn’t even soften.

His form is pliable on the sheets: moving as Gabe moves into him, fucking in earnest now, trying to chase that sensation again. To satisfy his mate. That base desire is all that’s left of him as he squeezes at Jack’s form hungrily and moves with a hysterical strength, chasing that warmth further.

He bends forwards, jerking Jack’s legs to an extreme angle, getting deeper into his mate and going near out of his damn mind. Jack is so fucking warm and soft inside, it feels like Gabe is carving out a place for himself, and it’s all he can do to show his enthusiasm not to let out these low grunts as he surges forward to nose into Jack’s neck.

He isn’t thinking --only wanting: desperate to clamp his teeth down onto skin that is his. To mark the act and make sure Jack is his in every way. The scent of wintergreen there is salacious and dizzying and Gabe wants more of it -- wants it between his lips like he wants blood around his mouth and he goes to bite on the apex of his thrust hungrily.

He doesn’t expect to be grappled, suddenly. For Jack to shoot a hand up and grab Gabe’s own neck, angrily, jerking his head away like he’s shaking it, coughing out some noise of anger where the vitriol is nearly swallowed with the sweet pleasure of it all. Denies Gabe the merest hint of access, and in his turning away, he disturbs the sheets and Gabe finds an undercurrent of creosote that reaches him, somehow.

In the dark, over the chorus of breathing, he hears, “Don’t --ah--” and it’s said with such hate, and disdain. Nails are digging into the skin of Gabe’s neck, now, but he wants. “No--!”

His jaw clamps shut for a second -- cowed by it. He can hear the buzz of neon and taste blood and tobacco and feel the roughness of motel sheets and he wonders if he’s ever thought through any decision that ever mattered, but even that is secondary to the way Jack tightens in his resistance and the squelch of slick goes straight up Gabe’s spine.

Rut or not, he won’t last much longer. And God, fucking into a place so warm and sweet, he doesn’t have the mind to, or the heart. The white of Jack’s face is red, now - red all the way to the chest and his pretty mouth is open as these obscene noises come out. He’s begging for it: to be filled, and to be knotted and Gabe doesn’t have even half a reason to deny him a thing.

In admission, or warning, as he feels the heat begin to bloom in the pit of his stomach, Gabe tries to chase the ends of his breath desperately, his head tipped forward, looking only at Jack. Recognising him even in the dark: by his scent and his noises. By whatever is left on his neck -- if, indeed, there’s anything left at all.

Jack’s feet hook into his shoulders. He’s so fucking wet -- so soft and takes Gabe as deep as he can,
gasping out all the while. His fingers are still twisted in the sheets of one hand, the other migrating from Gabe’s neck to his shoulder, scratching down hard enough to make trails. He keens with want, heatdrunk, his pretty cock rosy and leaking, still glistening with cum.

Gabe’s knot is already forming by the time he can pant words out, gasping, “J-jack--”

Eyes squeezed shut, head twisted suddenly to the side, Jack hisses out, “Just--” He never finishes the thought --the knot swelling enough to catch on his rim and tear a practical sob from him. He’s been in agony for days: he needs it.

It happens before Gabe can process it. Before he can savour it: a few more hungry thrusts before they lock together suddenly, and he feels the orgasm wrenched from his every fibre. He makes some noise in his throat --more that it’s stolen from him. His eyes would roll right back into his skull if he didn’t force them open; too afraid to miss the way Jack arches and there are tears in his eyes as he arches his back almost unnaturally and screams, coming hard.

Their noises taper off. Gabe’s, largely, to hard breaths as he comes lax and stupid, holding himself up by the arms only inches above where Jack lies. Jack’s breathing is hard, too, laced with small noises that are indistinguishable from pleasure or pain. Some blend of the two.

His head is still to the side, and for the first time, a part of the pale column of his neck is exposed. His scent is everywhere. Gabe doesn’t feel like he can even control himself to surge down again and nose at the skin there. Not even to bite --but to play at biting. To resolve the mystery.

As he does, he feels Jack tense. His form seizes, but he doesn’t fight it. Doesn’t scratch or go to push Gabe away. There are still tears in his eyes. Gabe realises that Jack is crying in earnest at the exact same moment he finds the last trace of a crescent-shaped mark, faint as anything, but yet unhealed on the skin there.

Still his--even after all of this.

He’s close to Jack’s face when he looks up. Even in the dark, he can see pain with perfect clarity: the way Jack won’t open his eyes. The tight clench of his jaw. He almost misses the worst detail of them all. The way Jack’s hand has migrated from the sheets. How it sits over his stomach.

Flat palm; resting there. Bereft.

- 

Ana rises at six to take calls.

Jack is --awake, still, somehow, but no doubt still out of action. She handles missing meetings, rescheduled appointments and keeps the peace of the still morning. It seems a lot to do from the small office in her private rooms, but, to herself? She’s become used to it.

The sun is already mostly-risen, and it catches through the blinds, climbing altitudes to be seen above the sharp peak of the mountain, but being eclipsed, mostly, from the angle she’s looking. Tea is cooling at her side. She savours the silence, looking over the weeks’ sheet to see where she can move a goodwill visit.

There’s a slide to her left with a series of contact details on: voluntary adoption agencies, Zurich’s social work department as well as New Mexico’s, a number of children’s services. There are a few
other things to collect for the boy. It feels like the least she can do.

She looks over at the modest collection of information and some feeling overcome her. For a second, she is alone in the hot mesa of home; belly swollen with life and unsure of where she is standing.

The feeling is of loneliness. Hopelessness.

The feeling passes.

Ana can continue to work for maybe ten minutes or so before Fareeha begins to stir. She can hear her stirring in the other room: the rustle of sheets, gentle footsteps. The running water of the tap, and then the low boil of the kettle. Her presence is calming to every sense, and Ana can hardly imagine the other road --the one she didn’t take; devoid of colour as it would have been without her girl.

Fareeha is more like her father: she has more lightness than Ana’s solemnity, and more optimism. She looks for the best in people --a kindness Ana was never quick to extend to the world, or even to those near to her and if she were Fareeha’s age, she would be so lonely. But the girl is sweet, an forgiving, and curious.

She doesn’t see the politics of Angela’s designation, or Gabriel’s indiscretions or Jack’s emptiness. Or --much like Jesse’s tattoo, maybe it’s that she sees passed these things.

It’s what’s on her mind when Fareeha does come into the room, with a cup of tea for herself, and an old, tatty book tucked under her arm. The girl’s hair is knotty and her eyes are still a little puffy from sleep. She looks like Sunday morning, more or less, as she murmurs, “Morning, mum.” in a cheerful enough tone. She sits cross-legged on the carpet by Ana’s chair.

“Morning.” Ana says, looking back at the timetable. “I didn’t wake you, did I, habibi?”

Fareeha yawn, wrinkling her nose. “It’s nice to be up early.” She puts the book down in front of her and reaches up to put the tea on Ana’s desk, where it can’t be knocked over. “I thought you weren’t working today.”

She isn’t supposed to be. Christ, she isn’t supposed to do half of what she does. But somebody’s got to. “I’m just rescheduling some meetings for the Strike Commander.” It feels inappropriate to call him Jack --still. It’s been weeks but she can still feel his form at her back, in the sheets. The light dusting of freckles on his left shoulder. The comforting weight of his arm draped over her hip.

None of those things exist to comfort her. They still hurt; distantly.

There’s a moment of silence almost out of mourning before Fareeha’s gentle voice broaches the quiet. “Is Uncle Jack still sad?”

Ana doesn’t even know the answer to that. She can still see him in the dark, in that bathtub, stinking drunk, ugly with tears. His grief seems to exist without the constraints of time.

“I would think so.” She settles on, instead, trying to sound gentle. “But he’ll be indisposed for today for a different reason.”

The implication is there in her tone. Fareeha isn’t a child too young to understand things like this: she
knows the way bodies work in the same way she knows the politics that govern them. It doesn’t mean she understands, though --who could, without going through it?

The girl’s silence is knowing. Ana drags a meeting to Thursday and hears the flutter of a page turning. There’s an awkward cough.

“With --with what happened, before--...” The girl sounds hesitant, which is rare to see. Usually so full of conviction is she. “Uncle Jack can’t have babies, can he?”

There’s a monster of a question. Yet another answer that eludes Ana. She glances at the holoclock in the corner and finds it to have yet to turn half past the hour, and she thinks that these questions don’t belong on peaceful mornings. She doesn’t want to relieve any of this year: not of Jack, in his sheets, nor of him in hospital sheets, bleeding, catatonic.

She feels guilty, of all things, to be having this conversation with her daughter. Things that are necessary often feel ugly, though.

“I don’t know about can’t.” She says, after a moment, pursing her lips. “I know that it’s --difficult, for him.”

There’s no mercy from the onslaught this morning: Fareeha is more cognizant than her appearance suggested. “I don’t know why he doesn’t do what you do.” She says, thoughtfully. “If his heat is as bad as you say they are, I mean.”

Her knowledge belies her lack of understanding, there. It’s not like it hasn’t been suggested to Jack -- and roundly, many times: that he should finalise his retirement and handover plans before trying to conceive. The stress of leading would surely hurt his chances, and it would be no disposition to carry a child in.

Stubborn, isn’t he? Ana used to think it was noble. Now she wonders if Jack isn’t just weak: trying to serve two masters at once. Or is it greed? Unable to hand over the reins unless he knows he has something better waiting. Wanting to have his cake, and eat it.

Ana certainly doesn’t miss her own heats. She can scarcely remember how they felt, now. “We’re not all as pragmatic as you.” She says, by way of answer, feeling herself smiling slightly at the comment. Fareeha’s practical side is something they both share. It is blunt and beautiful and she recognises it in herself.

It also seems to satisfy the girl enough to buy another ten minutes or so without question, and it’s a happy, hazy space of time in which Ana finishes the week’s timetabling and turns back to frying smaller fish in the inbox --making sure she’s chased up the leads that are important, and that no important foreign officials will be touching down on the runway looking impatiently to meet with the very indisposed Strike Commander.

Fareeha remains on the floor, sipping tea occasionally. Turning a page every now and then, and making quiet noises in reaction to what she’s reading. Ana can satisfy her own curiosity, now she isn’t concentrating nearly as hard. “What is it you’re reading?”

She turns around in her chair, and sees her girl laying on her front on the carpet, now, with the book before her --writing largely dominating the two-page spread, but with one anatomical diagram on one half of the left page.
“It’s from your bookshelf.” The girl says, mildly, putting her finger down the mark her page before flipping the front cover over. Ana recognises it immediately: a relic from the crisis days, with a faded picture on the front of a third-trimester omega who looks happier than is possibly realistic as he cradles his stomach. “I thought it might be useful to Jesse.”

Only to frighten him, Ana nearly says --but doesn’t, collecting herself enough to swallow. “That’s very thoughtful.” She posits, instead.

“He looks sad when I see him around.” Fareeha says --almost forlornly. “I think he needs cheering up.” She’s on the money there, but Ana thinks it’ll take a damn sight more than a book to do it. Having Gabriel around should at least ease the boy’s nesting anxiety, as well as having a little more of a plan.

As for whatever sadness is left? Ana can’t do a thing for him about that.

She watches Fareeha close the book, then, withdrawing her finger from the book, signalling her being finished with it. She looks thoughtful for a second longer before drawing back to sit with her legs crossed. “Being omega sounds hard.” She says, then, a little disjointedly. “Things like this make me worry about when I present.”

Ana remembers having this conversation herself --maybe at an earlier age, if only slightly, with her own mother. It was a different age, and norms have shifted far since then: but the fear is one she recognises. She hadn’t wanted to be omega: didn’t want to be rendered useless by heats and didn’t want to submit to anyone.

It’s why she knows what to say, immediately, coming off the chair and kneeling before Fareeha to be holding one of her shoulders affectionately. “Difficulty is a test of strength.” She says, easily, remembering the words herself. “You want to be an alpha? Want life to go easy on you?” She laughs at the suggestion. “That doesn’t sound like an Amari to me.”

Fareeha makes some face and half-nods, like she’s just wading through tautology rather than listening. Ana knows she needs to change her tactics.

“Besides.” She says, moving a hand to cup her daughter’s face affectionately. “We have something no other designation has.” her voice is breathless with earnestness: the most important lesson she ever learned. “We look out for one another.” She says. “We’re like a pack: we protect eachother.”

Fareeha looks up like she understands. “Like you and Uncle Jack?”

The statement comes left of field: unearths lots of things Ana has forgotten. Reminds her that the emptiness she’s feeling might be resentment just as it might be exposure: from not having Jack to watch her back, anymore. From not watching his.

Is it too late to go back? Too late to have a change of heart?

Ana feels some coldness seize her chest. She nods, anyway: her smile false, and learned from the Strike Commander himself.

“Just like Uncle Jack and I.” She says, and finds to her surprise; she still believes it.

-
Gabe sleeps, eventually.

The rut only keeps him animate for so long. Jack’s scent is all over his body, and all over the sheets, and it tides him over enough to close his eyes, eventually, as his breathing deepens and evens. Jack is in the sheets next to him; exhausted, stretched-thin, but a coward to the end, he doesn’t reach over to hold his mate (if that’s what they still are). Only watches his silhouette on the horizon his eyes.

Jack has had his lot of sleeping, even if he’s worn to pieces. His skin is over-sensitive and his insides feel like they are full of dishwater. The buzzing of it the heat has become bearable, at last --no longer debilitating and painful. The fever has broken, and for the first time in days, he has an ounce of clarity.

An ounce to feel shame with.

And he does, when he thinks about crawling across the bed to nose at Gabe’s neck. To ease himself again. To feel just a little bit less alone, and he thinks if he closes his eyes he can kid himself it’s before, and they can pray in the dark together that it takes. That retirement is only around the corner: as with the quiet houses. As with the baby.

Jack keeps his eyes open, though. He doesn’t move towards Gabe.

He’s not a believer anymore.

No, he’d even been angry, for a while, at how the foundations he’d built everything on --the ones he’d been standing on seemed to crumble in a series of instant events when really they’d never been there to begin with. Angrier, still, at something Gabe had said to him: how quickly he’d sold off their future to say ‘you could leave like you wanted’.

Like he wanted? It sounds like a joke. That he wanted to leave alone: mateless, and friendless (Ana won’t so much as look at him, now), with the offer of somebody else’s child.

No. Worse. Gabe’s child. The one Jack can’t give him.

He should despise this, but the concept keeps going round and around his head. He thinks of giving public statements years from now: old and tired and no good at having to lie. Thinks of all of the people who will tear him to pieces in columns and condemn him for not doing his job while they get to go home to safe lives and to houses of their own and children.

Jack’s riddled with lots of things, at this point. His grief is a beast of its own: war has made him jerky at sudden provocation and these last few months have hollowed him out. It’s not like he has options of adoption.

This could be it.

He turns in the sheets and stares hard at where Gabe is sleeping, secluded on one side of the soiled sheets. His form peaceful and easy. Healed from the injuries Jack left him --at least, externally. They match in that: there are no more claw marks on Jack’s arms or his face anymore.

Need might surge in him again at some point. Then the distance between them will diminish and Jack will rally against himself to fight the urge to break the arms that touch him and the nose that comes to scent him so intimately. Then--...
Then what?

Jack turns onto his back slowly, despite the dishwater feel of his insides and the sensitivity of his body. He closes his eyes --resigning himself to these next few hours. After that, he knows, the spell will break.

And he will leave.

Like he wanted.

- 

For the first time in weeks: the sky is clear by midday.

Summer rears it’s head well into August, bright and pleasant, and even from where Jesse is lying in bed, drowsing, unwilling to get up just yet, he can feel the heat of the light through the small window. Above the sharp, crested peak of the large, white mountain, he can see the sun as if it’s balancing there.

As if it’s climbed all that way to the top.

He opens his eyes to see it. Heat is familiar to him, and for a few seconds in the blood-bright and well-seeming dark of his closed eyes, he feels as if he is home. Home home, though: where the air is dusty and scents of those passing by seem to linger for hours. The sun is different here, though, swollen in the sky, heavier and lower, and paler as if overexposed. Like an X-ray.

And Jesse finds, today, he doesn’t mind it so much. Gabriel is here. Miss Amari wants to meet him in an hour or so.

He’s been suspended in air for so long, now. Answers feel imminent. Things’ll come as clear as the sun is, having finally summitted the great white mountain. He feels sure of it even as he swings his ankles over the side of the bed to sit up, and feels that same, strange sort of fluttering deep in the pit of his stomach.

He’s still not sure what it is. He thinks he knows: but it’s not a thought he likes.

The window in his bare little room is small, but there’s enough sunlight today that it feels airy, and warm. This is the first time he’s been able to stand how bare it is. He dresses for the walls only and feels, for once, safe rather than lonely. Even that doesn’t solve is dwindling source of clothes to wear that will fit him. Jesse doesn’t know how to requisition anything here, and he’s down to the too-loose navy uniform with the white crest on that he came here in.

He knows there’s a difference between Blackwatch and Overwatch that goes beyond uniform colour --but he doesn’t know what it is.

Hell, colour isn’t even his strong suit. He’d only found out last week that the colourblind mode on the screen in Gabriel’s room was for him. That he’s the one that’s missing something in his eyes that makes him see the world different, and Jesse wouldn’t usually rightly care. But for some reason it’s been bothering him: the idea that he doesn’t know a thing about himself: not the state in which he was born, nor the name of his mother.

(Or maybe it’s the fact that he knows it means he never saw Johnny how he was. Never got to see
the real colour of his eyes, or hair.)

It’s the smaller of the fish he has to fry today. He puts it out of his mind as he puts himself together. He takes Johnny’s hat before he leaves the room. It makes him feel more prepared to face things: especially things like he knows he’ll come up against imminently.

It’s not far off midday: the cafeteria is busier than he expects it to be, but efficient enough that he passes through without difficulty. No peaches today: he doesn’t want to get sick of them, and elects for peanut butter instead. Four slices of toast, with some orange juice. The real sweet stuff with the pulp in it that makes his teeth hurt.

There’s nobody there he knows, so he eats alone. He spots one or two of the company men he’s seen on the roster sheets, but his age and circumstances of hiring don’t make him any the keener to rub shoulder with any of them. He forgets, sometimes --about what it means to have a history like his, and the brand on his arm. Angela’s overly-auspicious sympathy is one thing: but that’s pity.

Not resentment. Not active dislike.

He’ll cross that bridge when he comes to it, anyhow. Maybe when things are less up in the air, and he’s on active duty, like how Miss Amari said he’d be someday. The roster for the different companies on active duty has them go to all kinds of places, too --Kings Bay and Mansoura and Paris and Mexico. And someday he’ll be one of that number. Someday he’ll be in Mexico; even if it’s only in fleeting.

He thinks about it as he finishes up, heading out the way he came in, down well-lit by half known corridors, searching for the room in the south wing that he’ll meet Miss Amari in by process of elimination.

The doors of the rooms all look the same from the outside. Nobody gets is right first try.

When he does find the room, he comes upon Miss Amari mid-laugh, comfortable with a cup down in front of her, her gaze migrating from the little miss at her left to Jesse when she sees him in the door. She has a slide open low in front of her. It doesn’t obscure her face.

It feels rude to look away from her and around the room before he comes inside. Hoping to all hell that he’ll see Gabriel inside. That he’ll already be here, wanting to be present for this --if not for Jesse’s sake, and all that there is between them, then for the baby that’s likely to be his. Doesn’t he have a horse in this race? Doesn’t he care?

Disappointed, then, but trying to hide it, he ducks his head and comes inside --remembering only when the little miss smiles at him to throw up some weak salute. It pleases them both all the same as he takes a seat. “Mornin’.”

Miss Amari smiles easily at him. “Good morning, Jesse.” She says, gently, with a confidence to her tone like she knows what she’s doing. It’s a sure relief to hear. “I hope you slept well.”

He lifts one shoulder impassively. “Well enough.” He says, and that much is true. “How’ve ya been, little miss?”

She smiles like she’s genuinely pleased to see him --and the idea of it makes him feel suddenly a little compromised, even as she says, “Well.” The word is an obstacle that she gets over quickly, her tone rushing to the next sentence with clear pleasure and excitement. “I have something for you.”
Jesse comes to sit down next to Miss Amari as he hears her say it, and this half-smile sort of comes over him. He’s a lot more used to receiving gifts from strange men, and somehow he doesn’t think this will be in the same vein. Still, it’s the thought that counts. It’s nice to be reminded he isn’t alone here.

With obvious delight, she pushes a medium-looking book across the table towards him.

Jesse’s never been given a book before.

He puts a hand on the cover and sets it in front of himself excitedly --excited all the way to the cover. Some young thing --though, older than Jesse, smiling serenely in this almost lobotomised way a one both hands attempt to contain the enormous swell of his bump. It’s almost alienesque: and while it’s presented as something natural and beautiful, Jesse is struck by an immediate and visceral dread.

His eyes scan the title almost fearfully. His mouth is utterly dry when he swallows.

The little miss doesn’t seem to register the reaction. So much the better, he thinks, until she goes on to say, “It was mum’s when she was having me.” She explains. “I thought it might be useful to you.” Jesse can see it all over her face, these good intentions that he doesn’t want to shoot down, and a lightness and hope he doesn’t want to betray.

He does his best to sound pleased, even if his voice comes out stiff as a wooden board. “That’s--” He looks down at it again, and then instantly up. “That’s real sweet of ya.”

He’d have preferred peaches. Or pills. Or a cigarette.

The contradiction is clear to him, too --of being so wilfully ignorant and horrified by what’s happening to him, but letting it happen over the cold and painful alternative. It’s not just about getting fixed --it’s more than that. It’s about what’s left of Johnny, and what’s left of all these questions Jesse had the first time.

It’s about jail, still, too; Jesse isn’t so quick to trust this place.

The little miss looks pleased enough with herself. It translates to her mother, who looks content enough as she drags the slide over so it’s visible to Jesse, too. It’s a series of contact details, by the looks of things. Jesse hopes she’s got a little more for him than that: hopes she’ll open her mouth and out will come a plan for him.

Miss Amari looks over him patiently. “These are the most relevant resources I could find for you.” She says, gesturing to them. “That is, of course, if you still feel that you want to put the baby up for--”

Jesse nods, sharply. “Yeah.” He says. It sounds more urgent than he intended: he sees the look of concern that graces the little miss’ face for only second, and it makes a part of him sink, a little. He tries to make it some joke, shrugging a shoulder with easy charisma. “Ain’t changed my mind or nothin’.”

Miss Amari can probably note the hesitation like a change in the direction of the wind, but in her kindness she says nothing about it. Not directly; anyway. “If that’s the case,” She says, gesturing down seriously. “You have some options worth reviewing. These--” The top four or so, she underlines with a sweep of the hand, “Are private adoption agencies across the US.”
Jesse looks over the names with some interest: he has some half-formed memories of wardhood. Of families he’d been injected into as if it were some solution to the stringless children that the war created: when, instead, he remembers smaller wars where no defence was available to him.

She scrolls down to the others and looks over at him as if trying to decipher his expression. “There are some public agencies, too, but these will depend on where you’d like the child to be.”

Jesse looks up with a mild frown. “What’s the difference?” Miss Amari looks up at him, a little blankly. “’B’tween public an’ private, I mean.”

She looks so damn worries for him --in a way nobody else has really ever looked at him that Jesse can’t hardly stand it. He tries to look away: down, but then he’s met with the cover of the book and he feel trapped: cornered on all sides by the circumstance he’s trying to make work. As if he could make a sinking stone fly.

“Public adoptions are usually paid for the relevant government.” She says. “You get the option to create an adoption plan, but it’s largely laissez-faire.”

The little miss cuts in with a gentle afterthought. “It means *hands-off.*” She nods.

Miss Amari can’t fight a small smile at it. “Quite so.” She says, looking so proud, for a second, before her focus returns. “The amount of control you have over a public process is very limited. Potential parents still have to go through rigorous checks, but you have very little say in to whom your child goes.”

It sounds familiar. That Jesse can’t conjure a clear imagine of his own other but can remember every hand that had the bite of frost in its backhand. Haunted, he nods, mute for just a moment. Miss Amari gets the message either way.

“Private agencies allow you to meet with prospective parents. There’s a much greater degree of control.” She pauses thoughtfully, as if to give him time to process the possibility. It’s a strange idea to entertain. Jesse doesn’t know if meeting anybody could mean much --he’s a pretty lousy judge of character anyway, all things considered. “You can also choose the kind of relationship you wish to maintain with the child and parents. Public adoption requires a voluntary relinquishment of parental rights.”

Jesse feels a creeping disappointment. “But it’s free.” He says, quietly.

Miss Amari shakes her head. “Finance won’t be an issue that concerns you.” She says it instantly, with this kind of resoluteness to it that’s comforting and sturdy. Something solid for Jesse to be able to cling to, at least. “Nor is time. This is about what you feel is best.”

What is best? Jesse doesn’t even know if that’s an option. How can there be a way that any of them win? There’s no best or even good: Jesse only intends for damage control, really. To keep himself out of a cell, and out of anything he doesn’t want to get into. And with --with Gabriel. If he can help it.

He sighs, then, turning his head, feeling suddenly frustrated. He gets like this, sometimes: trapped enough to want to ask for this to end. For them to fix him.

But he remembers waking, bleary and puddle-eyed. Remembers some strange sense of loss. Jesse
never even saw his baby before: never had one of those fancy appointments. Never had anything he
thought could be taken away. And it’s not a regret: he’s relieved, really. Glad about his choices.

But not enough that he’d go through it again.

Sensing his bewilderment, Miss Amari touches his upper-arm in a gesture of tenderness. “This is
something for you to investigate yourself. I don’t expect you to have a decision for me.” Her head
tilts, and she looks so easygoing about all of this. She acts like he’s got all the time in the world.
“That’s what these are for.” Pulling the slide closer to both of them, she nods as if in encouragement.
“These people will be able to tell you more than I will.”

Jesse looks over the name again. Lifelines, supposedly. What can they tell him? What can they
possibly know of any of this enough to make a difference? Jesse tilts his head miserably, but tries to
seem grateful. “Guess it don’t hurt to try.” He sniffs.

“Exactly.” Miss Amari says. She shares a look with the little miss for a second, before turning her
eyes back to Jesse. “You’re also scheduled to see the obstetrician next monday for an anomaly scan.
Use this time to start making a plan.”

He thinks about the woman in white he’d seen last time. It hadn’t been pleasant. Not as such. Jesse
only hopes that she gets more out of these appointments than Jesse does; he can hardly stand to look
at that little picture, hiding in a drawer in his bare little room. It was of more interest to Gabriel, he
supposes: and that thought comforts him in an inexplicable way he’s not sure he wants to explore.

But they aren’t done talking about it. He’ll have to just toughen up, really. Jesse takes a second
before he asks. “Can I talk to Gabriel about it?” The little miss looks momentarily confused. She
looks from Jesse to her mother.

Miss Amari nods. “Of course.”

But it feels too simple: a sure departure from last night when she’d all but dragged him away. He
swallows. “Now?” It’s intimate in the saying: he exposes himself with the desire behind his words.

But Miss Amari equivocates. She looks away from him, just a little, when she says, “Perhaps best to
form some of your own ideas first.”

She does it like Jesse won’t notice. That he doesn’t read the subtext that no, he can’t see Gabriel
right now. And that there’s something she isn’t telling him.

So much for promises.

Jesse nods, then, leaning back in his seat and biting his tongue contentiously. For a second he thinks
that he hates her --really, but it escapes him. If Gabriel wanted to be here, he knows, Gabriel would
be here. Miss Amari isn’t anybody’s keeper. Not even his. So he says, “Awright.” Happy to leave
the matter at rest.

Or, rather, as happy as he knows he can be.

There are other housekeeping tasks Miss Amari needs to chase up, anyway: showing him the
requisition process so he can order for his own clothes --ones made for pregnancy, too, not just
uniform. How to apply for absences in advance, and how to view or edit timetables. He knows in
concept that all ‘agents’ receive a sort of weekly stipend.
It turns out to be more than he’d make in three weeks. But he doesn’t say that.

All the while this is happening, the little miss is sitting there with this expression like she’s mulling something over. She keeps giving Jesse these looks in passing like the ones he’s seen from Angela; and even from Gabriel, in the strangeness of their first meeting. It’s more than a concern. It’s a problem, and the little miss is searching for a solution.

Her hand hesitates before she reaches to get her mother’s attention, turning to fix a frown towards Jesse instead.

Non-sequitur, she says, “What about Uncle Jack?” There’s a second of silence, then, as Jesse process the words. Recalls hearing heard the name but can’t assign a face to it. He can’t infer the girl’s meaning.

The cognition lasts for a second: he and Miss Amari both say the same thing at the same time, almost exactly. “What?”

The girl seems to be at the end of her puzzle, the solution-seeking expression having given way now to something more alike to confidence. “If you were looking for somebody to give your baby to.” She says, slowly, as Miss Amari’s mouth opens in some distantly horrified way, making out as if she’s about to cut her daughter off. “He’s--”

“What?” Miss Amari says, as if disapproving.

The girl isn’t having it. “But it makes sense. Doesn’t it?” She looks between the two of them helplessly. “Uncle Jack has wanted a baby for so long.”

Something about all of this feels wrong. There’s some compromised in Miss Amari’s tone -- something new, there, that has a weight to it, when she protests, “This isn’t about what Jack wants.” Jesse can hear the splinter, there. A dissonance: fondness, undeniably, but hurt, too. He’s heard and felt similar before. “This is about what Jesse wants.”

Then both of them look to him. Falling silent as if awaiting some answer. Jesus, let them wait. Jesse has nothing like that for them.

He shrugs one shoulder. He itches for a cigarette. “I ain’t got a laundry list a’ criteria.” he says, sounding sadder, by far, than he means. “I jus’--jus’ want what’s best an all.” His gaze migrates to the little miss, who is on the cusp of disappointment. “If y’really think it’ an option, then I guess there ain’t no harm in havin’ the conversation.” He looks to Miss Amari. “That’s what I’d be doin’ with a private agency, anyhow.”

Miss Amari nods, as if conceding the point. But her initial distress is far from resolved, and it bothers him. So he asks her. “What d’you think, anyway?”

Miss Amari has a moment of looking absolutely antipathetic: but it leaves her just as quickly as it seemed to come on. “What do I think of what?”

Jesse swallows. “That Jack fella.” He tries not to play on the conflict he’d seen across her face. “D’you think he’s worth considerin’?”

(Jesse is unaware of the crossroads he’s standing at with that question. He never gets to be aware of
the road he doesn’t take. He doesn’t have the pleasure, and torture, of knowing the way things could be different. Not like Jack.)

The little miss looks agonised at the time it takes for her mother to give an answer. Hours, proverbially, before Miss Amari looks away and nods; distantly. “I do.” she says, and nothing more.

Her hand moves of its own accord, and without explanation. She migrates away from the slide she’s on and onto another; some calendar. The quiet persists, then. and Jesse knows from his own experience that he needs to give the issue room to breathe. It doesn’t make the suggestion of this third party any the more glamorous to him, but he can live with that.

Eventually, Miss Amari looks back up at him. “I’ll raise the issue to him and then we can proceed from there.’’ Clinical all of a sudden. Jesse tries to ignore it. “Your main priority until you hear anything is to look into the options I’ve given you.” Her eyes cut conspiratorially to the little miss before she says, “And speak with Gabriel.”

By now, all Jesse could hope for is a cigarette, and the chance to get some clothes that fit him. He’s more than ready to call this quits: having got what he came for. Clarity hasn’t made anything the easier. If anything, the more Jesse knows, the harder it all is.

Maybe that’s why the idea of thumbing through the little miss’ gift is so abrasive to him: it will force him to see the situation for what it is. To see the baby as a baby: part of him and Johnny or Gabriel and something new and whole by itself. He couldn’t think of anything worse, right now.

They conclude things like that. There’s nothing more to say, really: they could talk all day and it wouldn’t help anybody. Jesse has to come up with an answer, and he has to do that by himself.

He doesn’t think of the room he’s leaving behind once he’s left, with his book in tow, and his head spinning.

Doesn’t think of the two Amari’s, left sitting together in silence.

He doesn’t linger to hear through the wall how Fareeha turns to her mother, then, in some dignified and righteous sort of hurt. “You hesitated.” she notes, “When he asked about Jack. You almost didn’t–”

“But I did.” Ana reminds her, then. Has already made up her mind about the truths she’s keeping. Knows what she has to do when she swallows and turns fully to her girl to her the fullest and best of attentions. “There’s something about Uncle Jack I want to tell you.” She says. And there’s no going back after a statement like that -- that’s clear even in Fareeha’s expression alone. “Something I don’t want you to tell anybody else. Okay?”

Fareeha looks panicked, then. Antsy: torn between her desire and curiosity towards secrecy and her fear of losing the rosiness that colours her perception of Jack; and all the others she holds so dear in her heart.

The vital moment of consideration passes and goes. She nods, “Okay.”

The story itself is not so long: but its effects are felt, still, like the Tillamook Burn.

Ana can see the way her daughter’s face changes, and in the dark of her eyes, there’s a forest fire. A conflict she recognises, and a quiet agony of loss she knows. The loss in her eyes is a visible as those
flames.

And in some part of the girl, just as her mother: a place she once loved is burning.

Chapter End Notes

a point of interest: which character do you relate to most in this and why? which person do you think is the 'best', and which the 'worst'?
The afternoon is bleeding over into the evening.

Gabe comes around to a shape on his horizon. One he used to wake to, for years and years, and though its form has changed over time he recognises it in an instant.

Smaller than it used to be, not out of growth, but out of distance. Jack is across the room: but even that, and everything else cannot overcome the history of it all. Gabe still has this initial moment of utter joy. Of relief: to see his mate, before he remembers where they are, and when they are.

And who they are, too.

The buzzing in his skin and in his brain has subsided, largely. He has enough clarity to feel something. It’s not regret. It’s not loss. But it’s not a million miles from either of those.

For however faint it is, Jack kept his mark. He could have washed it away so easily in all the time Gabe was in Belarus: yet, there it remains. Maybe that’s the sole reason he asked for Gabe. It could just as easily be delirium as instinct. Or habit.

But if it isn’t, then --what does it mean? Or does it mean anything?

Jack isn’t looking at him, he doesn’t think, but he’s clearly noticed Gabe’s consciousness when he asks, in this wrecked inch of a voice, “What are you thinking, when you look at me like that?”

He’s asked Gabe that before: what could be lifetimes ago, at this point. He had as much of an answer then as he does now, propping himself up unsteadily on an arm, and looking fully towards Jack. There are some things that remain, at least.

For once, merciful, Jack does turn, and Gabe can see his profile. He doesn’t get the benefit of his mate’s full face. He doesn’t know if he could stand to see it: if he’d be brave enough to look.

He drops his head but remains where he is to let out some sigh. “If I knew, myself,” He says, quietly. “I’d tell you.”

This isn’t a conversation they should be having here. God knows Gabe is still half out of it, and there’s no way to tell how Jack is faring. Not past the way he is obscured in the room and not past the distance between them and not past his pride. He never planned not have a talk like this –but if they’re going to, and if it’s all got to be laid on the line or something, he’d rather not do it here.
Not where the sheets are soiled and disturbed with something unhappy and rotting to the core: not like love and not instinct alone.

A part of him wonders, then --some hangover from their hopeful days of this ritual, or maybe it’s some awful and self-destructive drive-- about what happens next if this takes. Isn’t that terrible? Cruel, and merciful, all at once? Gabe can’t begin to say what they’d do. If Jack would even dare to be happy (of course he’d be happy); if it would be enough to tie their kitelines into knots again.

Isn’t that fair to hope for? That they’ve both done enough to each other that they couldn’t possibly survive anybody else. Maybe Gabe broke his heart out in that desert. And maybe Jack set out to break his, too. But they’re even now, aren’t they?

And if they are, why--....why does it still hurt?

Gabe sits himself up, now. Tries to muster words, but his mouth is dry and his throat is constricted to a pinhole. “You kept it.” He says, like an accusation. Jack doesn’t ask ‘what’. His gaze turns withering and does that job for him. “Your mark.”

It’s probably the wrong thing to say. To make his hope known, explicitly. Jack could scorn it the moment he hears it, but doesn’t. Gabe can see the tension in his mate’s body. The hard, firm shutness of the jaw there. He thinks maybe it’s all hopeless: that Jack won’t even deign to talk to him, until he heaves this shuddering sigh.

“I thought--...” Jack begins, his voice a tattered little remnant of its full form. “I thought it would be harder.”

He doesn’t clarify further. Gabe takes it to mean their union: that maybe Jack wanted to put up more of a fight. That he didn’t want to be seen like this: caught at the mercy of his heat. What if Jack meant something else? He thought keeping the mark would be harder? Or calling it all off?

(Wrong, on both counts.)

“With Ana.” The words are like some instant knife. Gabe can’t find it in him to despise this, right now. He can only listen. “I just --just kept waiting for something to stop me.”

Gabe know the sentiment of those words with an immense depth. To this day, he still wonders about some effective inhibition. How, if only one had appeared to him at Jesse’s bedside to spare them all this pain. Maybe that’s some testament to his character; that he doesn’t know what that something could have been to stop him. The thought of Jack hadn’t --somehow.

No: it had been seamless. Inescapable as gravity.

It hurts him to realise the same is true for Jack: but the hurt is necessary. Pain is the world’s oldest teacher.

“And --and after, when it was done--” Jack lets out some other noise: not a sigh, really, but it’s an afterthought expressed without words. Did he enjoy any of those moments he was above Ana on strange sheets? Or was he only seek to form a knife to twist? Gabe has never taken Jack for being one so cruel (but then, he supposes, it takes one to know one). “I thought it’d--...I don’t know.” He shakes his head.

Their eyes meet for a second. Jack is the first to look away. “It was supposed to make us even.”
Even? As if there can ever be parity in pain. Jack looks back at him again, and Gabe can see the
glimmer of something like ‘sorry’ in his blue eyes. “Not this.”

They shouldn’t be doing this now. Shouldn’t they be saving this for when Gabe has better grace and
good sense. Of when his head is clear enough to muster another apology, for one. For to explain that
in all this time, he’s never acted out of spite. That, even if it’s worse, he does have some true
affection for Jesse.

He doesn’t expect Jack to ask --like he’s calm about it. Like the initial storm has passed, when he
breathes out, gently. “Is that how it was with the little deadlock boy?”

He doesn’t use Jesse’s name, though. Gabe can’t honestly tell how far this statement falls from their
initial confrontation (‘how was he? Was he good?’). Maybe it’s some genuine curiosity. After all,
Jack can understand better now, can’t he? Made the both pay through the teeth for this bit of
perspective.

But it was never about hurting Jack. It was about finding him, again.

Gabe doesn’t want to talk about it. Not the whiskey or the bathroom floor or the CPR. Jesus, at this
point he doesn’t even know if it would buy him any favours. Honesty is only worth so much, and in
there here and now it’s easier to lie. For both their sakes.

He turns over in the sheets and shakes his head. “It was --it was just a trick, you know.”

It’s phrased badly enough to be risible, and Jack is halfway to coughing out some bitter accusation
when Gabe speaks up again. “A trick of the light, I mean. It was some fucking --five seconds where
I wasn’t thinking.”

That’s really no better, even if it’s half-true. Gabe thinks he’s been cautious his whole life: so scared
to toe a foot out of line for something as cheap and fleeting as impulse and the one
damn time he let his emotions get the better of him, it becomes all he’s known for. It costs him almost
everything.

Jack is looking at the corner of the mattress with this hollow sort of cool on his face. “Five seconds?”
He asks in that way that suggests that any attempt at answering would be dangerous. “Well, if I’d
known that’s all it takes--”

Gabe is tired, through and through. “You know what I mean.” He says, utterly finished with the
conversation but knowing it isn’t his call to end things, or to run away. Lord knows he’s done
enough of that.

Jack is quiet for at least a few seconds, then. He moves to standing, then, even if he looks steady as a
foal, reaching across the room to a discarded jacket on the floor. Gabe isn’t sure what he’s after
under he sees the carton of cigarettes he’d secreted in the top pocket.

He hasn’t seen Jack smoke a cigarette in something like 15 years, and never thought he would again.
That’s Jack all over: the wimp himself, who’s pride never lets him lie but allows him to ask for help.
Doesn’t see himself in anybody, and certainly not in Gabe, or Jesse.

Or Ana, anymore, come to think of it.

“Momentary lapse.” He notes, wistfully. “Brought him here, though, didn’t you?”
Gabe cants his head towards the jeans by indication of where the zippo is. “Ana was the one who put Jesse forward to Blackwatch.” He says, trying to be removed from it. He has a lot to despise her for -- but on this one, he wonders if he shouldn’t make his gratitude for her known. That she did bring him here. That she does look over him when Gabe can’t. “Not me.”

The lighter snaps, and for a second Jack’s white face is illuminated in strident orange and Gabe sees an old war, forgotten, for just a second. But it’s over and then nothing but the tip glows and Jack’s face fades back into rubble-grey.

“Please.” Jack says, distantly. “You’d have bailed him with your own money if it came to it.” His head shakes again but it doesn’t believe some deep hurt. Like part of him has made peace with it -- and maybe Gabe can believe that. Maybe they are moving forward from this after all. “So you can stop pretending you don’t--” There’s a second of fresh hurt before Jack stamps it out; flicks ash careless onto the floor. “That there’s not something between--”

Gabe doesn’t know what to say. Doesn’t even know if it’s true, and his love is made afraid enough that he tries to contest the truth of it. “That’s not--”

Weak parry: Jack turns on him with nothing but some patient sadness. His mouth quirks like he wants to laugh but can’t quite find it in himself. “The look on your face when you saw his personnel file in that gym.”

The subtext occurs to them both at exactly the same time: it should have been Jack.

It should have been Jack, but it wasn’t, and it won’t be, and they can do this for the rest of their lives and it still won’t be.

All the tragedy of the world can’t quite capture that. How much has Jack given to this world? Gave up his college scholarship to the military, his health to the SEP, his sanity to the war and every last fibre of his being to Overwatch, and he has nothing to show for it. No quiet houses. No children.

Is it worth it? If he could go around again, would he make the same choices?

Gabe doesn’t ask. He knows, in a heartbeat, Jack would stand by what he’s done in the same breath and tone that Jesse did, all those months ago. They are the same, like that: have spent years sleeping on a bed of swords and refusing to bleed.

They could both do something else: but they won’t.

And Gabe’s always been taken by conviction.

There’s another moment of lingering silence as Jack smokes. He hasn’t forgotten an inch of the act. It’s nature to him, still. Gabe knows that. How hard old habits are to cast away: after all, they become what they repeatedly do.

Then Jack shakes his head again, and sighs. “Ana --she--” His words are momentarily unfathomable. He finds them eventually. “I don’t think she could so much as look at me right now, and you--” His mouth quirks, like he’s preparing for words that will hurt him. “You love that kid, don’t you?”

Gabe distantly recognises a trap, and danger.
But he wonders if his ankle is already in the snare by the time he’s faced with the question. Yes: and the rope tightens. No, and a lie is recognised (and Gabe has never been any good at lying to Jack). To say anything else would be no answer at all: another, more final cowardice.

Or maybe it’s just his truth: which is disappointing unto itself when he says, “I don’t --I don’t know.” He thinks he does. He thinks he shouldn’t.

It’s not an answer.

Jack doesn’t dignify it, then. He nods, distantly, like he’s heard something mild and meaningless. He’s still a wreck, but he’s out of the other side of his heat, thereabouts, and heady, intense wintergreen has given way to the last of the melting snow. Gabe thought he would live in winter for the rest of his days.

Now? He has no place to go, really. He can’t stay here, in Jack’s room (not theirs), in Jack’s bed, taking up space in a life he’s not sure still belongs to him. And Jesse --Christ, the kid needs him now more than ever.

So he sits up in the sheets as Jack finishes the cigarette. He finds his shirt, discarded by the bed. He only hears Jack speak as he begins dressing.

“If --if Agent McCree still wants to give his baby up for adoption,” He says. It’s with great difficulty, too. “Then I’d like to speak with him about it, at some point.”

Something in Gabe is struck, then — that house he’d been building in his mind all these years occurs to him, and it’s like somebody has turned a light on inside of it. Maybe Gabe won’t live there, after all, but to be able to gaze in through the window and see some scrap of that promised happiness? It would be enough, after all of this.

He gets his shirt on without too much difficulty and ignores the strange and painful longing in him that coincides with the warmth, there, at imagining Jack to be happy.

Jack, who is lingering by the door to his ensuite weakly. He turns to go: to be left, but pauses.

“Gabe?” His voice is gentler than usual. Ten years younger. Sweeter. Gabe finds him in the dark without even having to use his eyes. Jack is looking at him, impassively. Not angry, anymore.

“If you’re done lying to me about the kid,” He says. “Then you should stop lying to yourself.”

There’s no wait for a reply. He goes, and closes the door behind him.

And leaves Gabe in darkness.

(What?

You think he’d let Gabe do that to him? Take and take for all these years, and leave him with nothing to play at house with that little deadlock boy?)
No. He doesn’t get to win. )

- 

Jesse thinks of E/55/002 as his.

It’s some small, communal rec room as far as he can tell: it has a mounted projector, and basic kitchen facilities, and a game table. It’s airy and windowed on one side completely and people are coming and going through it all the time. It never feels lonely.

It has, also, Jesse’s favourite moment since arriving here: after he’d finished that whole jar of peanut butter and Gabriel had come to find him and how ugly their conversation had been. He can still remember the sense of utter security, though, of the afterward: drowsing up against Gabriel like that. His scent all strong to Jesse, and the warmth of his body like a wall of arms.

Like nothing so terribly bad could happen so long as Gabriel kept holding him.

See, it’s his room, this one. It reminds him of that little space he’d had back at the motel: how somebody was always coming or going, and how it was a room of purpose. The bed was his dealing table and his couch and his livelihood and from the window he can see beyond the busted neon sign to the lights of the distant town, occasionally.

Nothing like his room here, sterile and empty and lonely, with nobody to come by and nothing to look out on by that great, White Mountain.

What can he say for himself as he sprawls out, taking up the whole couch, scrolling through the details of one of Miss Ana’s resources? A creature of habit don’t have no real protection.

He doesn’t think much by it when he hears footsteps draw into the room, and then the beginnings of a ritual to him, by now. Coffee, he’d guess: the click of the kettle switch and the opening and closes of the drawer that makes the cutlery rattle in its tray. He wouldn’t mind a tea, really — Miss Ana’s constant offers have him partial, by now, even if he’d prefer it sweet and cool for a hot day.

Tempted, then, he makes the decision to stand as he moves the slide to one side.

He’s halfway up, one hand on his lower back and one on the arm of the couch, when he does say, “Could’ja get a cup—”

He hears a cupboard close, suddenly. Turns to see Angela as the interloper in the kitchen, looking spooked to all hell. Even in the electric yellow light she still looks white as a snowdrop, clutching a cup to her chest all tight. “Jesse,” She murmurs, breathlessly. “You scared me half to death.”

There’s mirth in her voice. She isn’t so mad, really. Even if she is, Jesse is just glad to see somebody he knows. “I won’t scare y’again, then.” He says, easily, drawing up to standing properly and coming around the couch to lean back against it. “Jus’ after another cup, if there’s one goin’.”

Angela nods, then, coming back to herself, and turns to put her own cup on the counter. She’s dolled up for something like work: spiffy white coat and her hair all pulled back. She is a pretty thing, and Jesse can appreciate that innocently enough as she turns away and reaches another cup down for him.

He can appreciate it less innocently, too, but that’s frankly harder to do given that he knows Angela
isn’t that sort of alpha (and even if she were --well, Miss Marie couldn’t sell him to a blind man in a dark room as he is now).

Maybe she can sense him thinking too hard: she’s a sensitive enough girl. “Coffee or tea?” She asks, and turns her head.

He nods in some quiet appreciation, trying not to seem as thankful as he is. “Tea, if y’got it.”

Jesse’s been put off coffee for years. The stuff from back home --instant granules that were probably half-soil, sort of haunts his experience of it. Plus, that book the Little Miss got him has a whole laundry list of things he’s not supposed to be having anymore. Most of it is stuff he hasn’t ever even tried, but of all things, coffee’s there.

Thumbing through it has been a real experience. He can’t really get a few sentences in without feeling stupid and sort of embarrassed --and then he has to go and close it for his own pride. But his turnaround is quick, and it’s only ever a few minutes or so before he’s cool enough to open it back up.

Angela is done with the tea by the time he’s out of his own head. She’s looking at him with a mild curiosity. Jesse never thought he’d miss being looked at with lecherous hunger, but there’s a lot to his circumstance he never saw coming.

“I hope you don’t mind my company.” Angela says, gently. She warms her hands on some of the rising steam from her own mug. “I feel like I’m going quite mad in that lab.”

Jesse doesn’t mind her company a bit. It’s nice to have somebody to talk to. “Lab, huh?” He smiles, distantly. “Cookin’ up somethin’ special?”

That makes her laugh --a rare kind he’s never seen before. Real: frustrated and sharp. “If only.” She say, then, milder, collecting herself. “My cells aren’t much responding. I’ve got no data to--...” she really does have something to say, too, but she trails off when she starts looking at him, like she’s realising an irony. “Well,” She murmurs, “I suppose there are worse things.”

Jesse wonders if she knows how much happier he was, out there. Wonders if it’s worth saying.

He’s not so measured to give it any real thought, though, before it’s coming out anyway. “I think you got the wrong idea.” He says, absently. “About how it was for me, b’fore this.” Angela’s hands hesitate. A look of shame takes her faintly. “I was --I was headin’ down to Mexico when I got mixed up with this institution.” He nods, trying to make it true. “I’d saved up all this money, an’ I was gonna head there and buy me some land an’ --an’ raise some horses.”

There’s some indignance to it. He’s tired of people thinking that exiling him here, in the vast and icy nowhere, has been his saving. Like the before was so terrible and he’d have amounted to nothing in a handful of red dust.

But one way or another, Jesse’s always been made for big things.

Angela looks like she doesn’t know where to put her hands. “We have outposts,” She says, gently, “Down in Mexico, I think. You might still get the opportunity.”

Jesse’s only told of Mexico to a handful of people, before: Johnny, for one, and Gabriel. Now Angela. See, Johnny was the first, and when he’d heard it he’d ruffled Jesse’s hair all playfully and
shook his head and said ‘that’s a long way to go for nothing’, and still Jesse assumes his wishes will be hissed at.

He’s not so quick to cling to hope.

But Angela is a believer: he can see as much on her face --and it brings out his forgiveness for her sharp and clumsy manner.

“What about you?” He asks, suddenly tired of talking about himself. “Y’always aimed to end up here?”

She takes a tentative sip despite the tea being visibly too-hot, and shrugs one shoulders mildly. “I suppose so.” She says, with a distant kind of fondness. “It’s home, at least.”

Jesse cocks his head at that. “What --here?”

Angela nods, with a smile. “Not right here.” Her voice is all patient. Jesse thinks, briefly, she’d be good with small children. “Bern. You can catch a train from the city and get there in an hour.” She take another drink of her tea, and Jesse’s thought work themselves in and out of knots privately. He doesn’t know how to get to the city nearby --Zurich, apparently. He wonders about it. About Bern.

He talks out of the corner of his mouth to seem less invested. “S’it nice, there?” He catches Angela’s eye. “I ain’t travelled much.”

She looks at him for a second too long. Looks away. “I could take you, if you’d like.” Then that look --the haunted one leaves her eyes and she looks almost joyful in her candour. “I’m not the best at expressing myself,” She says, “But I do like you, Jesse. I can’t tell you how nice it is to have somebody here to be able to talk to.”

That makes Jesse laugh --real laugh, and he tips his head back with the bark of it. “Aw, Angie,” He smiles, “What’s there to talk ’me about? I don’t know a damn thing about anythin’ --an’ the stuff I do know about ain’t decent enough that y’wanna hear it--”

Angela cuts in like some co-conspirator. “No, I never said that.” she says, matter-of-factly, with some foxlike smile. “I’m just as curious as Fareeha, you know. Just more --more tactful about it.” She looks all kinds of pleased with her remark. Jesse likes that.

He gives her the same look, all coy and wise. “That a fact, huh?”

She nods right back at him. “Indeed it is.”

It’s an odd sort of thing. Jesse isn’t really used to interest. Gabriel had been some of the most conversation Jesse’d ever had out of a client (no shortage of iron there with his radio silence on what Jesse should do about the baby, of course --didn’t want to tell Jesse what to do but was happy to tell him every other goddamned thing). Thing is, he likes to talk. He does --and he likes this.

He’s not used to having a conversation without subtext. But Angela doesn’t seem to want anything: isn’t going to pin him to the sofa or smack him around until he’s weak enough to let a few bottles of pills go missing.

Whatever breed of alpha she is, he could get used to it.
She’s still looking at him, too, with all kinds of interest from behind her cup. It’s frightening and delighting, all at once. She takes a breath in, “When you--...” but falls short.

Jesse figures there’s nothing left to be asked about that can hurt him. He tilts his chin. “When I?”

Angela smiles, awkwardly. “I was just curious about how --well, how you knew what substances you were selling.” She looks off to the side. “How could you be sure they were real, or safe?”

He can’t help the laugh at that, and from her reaction, he feels bad for it immediately. “Safe ain’t really a concern in that kinda racket.” He says, by way of explanation. “I was never much for taking, anyway, but we knew they was real, awright.” He thinks back. It’s a strange thing to bring up, here. “Most stock came up from Mexico. B’fore it came up the line, it was normally put through tests.”

That’s what Johnny said, anyway. But Johnny was a taker: he liked his uppers. And there’s a difference between a drug dealer and a con artist. Jesse waves a hand. “We wasn’t jus’ sellin’ anythin’.”

Angela looks all sorts of concerned, and unconvinced. She swallows like she’s nervous. “But you didn’t --regulate any of it. Somebody could have been hurt--”

Jesse wants to laugh again. He doesn’t, this time. “They’re big boys out there, y’know. Full grown. They know what they’re getting into.” He doesn’t appreciate the subtext (which here is, ‘you didn’t’). It’s probably for the best. He doesn’t realise he’s speaking in present tense, either. “It’s supposed t’be good press if somebody does go west, so t’speak. Means it’s a good trip.”

Angela looks even whiter in the face for a second. Maybe it sounds cruel, or morbid. It’s a cruel and morbid business. People get the wrong idea because Jesse isn’t older: seem to think he spent the whole time lying around naked playing hands of canasta.

He feels like he’s made some misstep in his honesty, and he wants them to go back to playful ease so badly that he coughs and shrugs at the same time. “It’s an ugly line a’ work.” He mumbles, “I know it is. But I never gave somebody a fix to kill ‘em.” He lets out some helpless laugh. “Hell, worse I ever dosed anybody was myself.”

The shock on Angela’s face turns to some curiosity, morbid and forbidden as seems to feel to her. She’s practically leaning forward. “What happened?”

What did happen? Jesse has a hazy at best recollection of that night, in glorious detail, he remembers all about Johnny in the early afternoon, and how it was quiet out and how he’d been sort of tender for once (which Jesse doesn’t really care for). He remembers Gabriel coming by, and how he’d wanted --and how he’d done a few lines of coke to brighten himself back up from the whiskey.

“I don’t remember all of it.” He says, absently. “Or in the greatest a’ detail. I’d done a few lines so I wasn’t dopy from drinkin’. I’d been left what I thought was some more coke, so I cut another line.” He wets his lips. He swears he can feel the beginnings of a new nosebleed just thinking about it. “Must’ve been heroin or somethin’. It was like my brain was burnin’.”

Angela looks about on the edge of her seat. Like these are some theatrics. A good story or a rumour, and not a memory. Makes no difference to Jesse.

“There was blood comin’ outta my nose. Everythin’ was spinnin’.” He shakes his head. “See, I kept
one a’ those overdose kits in the bathroom in case a’ emergency, but I couldn’t reach it.” That much is true. He’d been able to gracing the glass of the cabinet before he’d gone down. “Passed out then and there, I guess.”

Gripped, utterly, Angela’s voice is some childlike murmur of awe. “It’s a miracle you’re alive.”

Jesse laughs at that --still not a believer. “Not sure about a miracle. Some good timing, maybe.” If it were a miracle he wouldn’t have felt rotten to all hell for a week afterwards; but he’s grateful, anyway. “If Gabriel hadn’t a’ found me when he did--”

He sees the dots connecting themselves in her head for a second before Angela interjects once more. “Reyes?”

Jesse nods. “Saved my ass, an’ no mistake.”

It’s strange how far away it all feels now. His stint in prison feels like a buffer: some liminal few weeks that separate him from then and now. So much has changed. He’s bona fide, now, isn’t he? Got people here that have his best interests at heart, and here he has a line to Mexico and he has Gabriel right next to him. He hasn’t touched any kind of pills since that night. The only drink he’s had as whatever was soaked in the rag the stuffed in his mouth to keep him quiet while they branded him.

Hell, he’s a reformed character, isn’t he? Or something close, at least.

Jesse doesn’t realise he’s so off in his own head until Angela coughs quietly and work her way through awful tension just to ask, “Reyes --is he--...”

Her eyes cut down to Jesse’s form and back up. The first time she’s done it so far today, like she’d been avoiding it in the conversation. That’s not so easy anymore: not like it used to be. He’s down to the shirt Miss Ana had given him on the first day. His scent is all saturated with it, and now he’s so big that he can rest a hand on hand on the top of his stomach and a hand on the bottom.

Nevermind those little flutters or all the official business to take care of. Angela finds her nerve eventually. “What I mean to say is --well, is he--”

There’s this look of distant horror on her face. Not approval or kindness, and even though it’s slight, when Jesse realise what it is, he turns cold in an instant. Even colder at the prospect of answering her question with the truth: he doesn’t know if it is or isn’t Gabriel’s.

He looks off at some bleak corner of the room. “That ain’t your concern.” He says.

As if sensing her faux pas, Angela raises hand as if in trying to still him. “I didn’t mean to insinuate--”

Jesse shrugs. “S’not important.” He says, a little thickly (because it is important. Stupidly, stupidly important). He moves up off the couch he’s leaning against and goes to the arm to fetch his book, feeling all cool, tingling from the remark. “I --I’m tired anyway.”

He barely looks at Angela, despite how fraught and sorry for herself she looks. She can look as sorry as she likes, right now, even as she says, “Jesse, I really didn’t mean to--”

“Yeah.” Jesse sighs, passively. “You can have my tea.” He wanders all the way to the door,
dragging his own shame like some ball and chain and feeling her eyes on him all the while. Funny girl, she is. Some inverted mirror of what he could’ve been, had circumstances been different.

As he reaches the threshold of the room, he hears her murmur, “Goodnight, then, Jesse.”

He murmurs a goodbye before he remembers what’s been playing on his mind since that meeting this morning, with Miss Ana.

He puts a hand on the doorframe. He pauses. “Hey, Angie?”

She’s quick with a reply. “Yes?”

There’s a moment of hesitation, before he figures what he’s asking. “If I was lookin’ for Fareeha’s uncle on the mainframe -who’d I ask for?”

It’s a process of elimination for Angela. Not Gabriel. Jack. She doesn’t bother to ask why.

“Well.” She says, gently. “Jack.”

Jesse nods his head in the door. “Thanks.” he says.

And then he’s gone.

The year after the end of the crisis, and Overwatch became a formal institution, Jack was given a crown of laurels full of hidden thorns.

Overnight, he went from a figure in a few blurry pictures to the full public view. Strike Commander. American Hero.

Time’s Magazine’s man of the year, that year, too.

It’s the first thing Jesse sees in a generic search under the name: the cover picture of this broad, blonde thing standing amidst rubble and destruction with the hand of some blood, lost child in his. Jesse doesn’t recognise him, at first, from the delirious man in Gabriel’s sheets, nor the haughty omega on the other side of the interrogation table.

He gets swept up in it: the narrative of it all. Jesse has only ever known a history of bad men, and this story is --it’s different.

(It is contrived, of course. Jack doesn’t see that magazine cover as some compliment: all he can recall is Gabe’s withdrawal, and how for every interview thereafter they’d had to paint over the mark on his neck and how he never really knew what to say to anybody.

He was never supposed to do any of it alone.)

The history of it is kind to Jack. It paints him well, but the more recent the articles that Jesse fin, the more slander and conjecture he comes upon.

One of them --a video, is some public statement about Deadlock. About that bridge incident. Jesse finds it unbearably hard to get through --not just for his own guilt, but how the blonde’s eyes have
lost their shine, there. He looks so fucking empty as he talks: like he’s been pulled out of the grave and had his bones stuck together with glue and then had a script and camera pointed at him all in one go.

It’s a hard contrast to some of the others: some in gala-type settings, and some with Miss Ana and with Gabriel where the blonde looks happy and easygoing; gold and brilliant without illumination.

He thinks about what he’d heard the little Miss say. About how long the man in the pictures has wanted a child for.

And Jesse isn’t so stupid as to not be able to put two and two together. The way he’d been all bright with life in that interrogation room? How empty and delirious he’d been, in those sheets?

Jesse can see tragedy a mile off.

He wonders, then, if this blonde is the shadow that hangs over Gabriel’s bed. The one that has Gabriel all short and defensive about his mark. About how he’d wanted babies but had none, and how, when Jesse had asked him, the first time, about who gave Gabriel that mark by saying ‘he gone?’ all Gabriel could muster was a ‘something like that’.

It’s just conjecture, though: he eases the strange anxiety that’s been overtaking him the last month or so by telling himself that. Gabriel’s not the falling-in-love type. Either way, it’s not like marks are sacred.

It’s always been like how Miss Marie said it. All this nonsense about marks, and mates, and designation and all that nonsense? It’s just some trick of nature to stop the human race from fading out. That’s all it’s there for. That’s why it never mattered if marked men came through his door, and why it was meaningless for any of them to ever try to mark him.

Not that Jesse minds the fairytale. In fact, the smaller New Mexico shrinks in his memory, the more he thinks he wouldn’t mind being somebody’s something. Being --being Gabriel’s something.

It’s a distracting thought. Another trick: one that makes him feel helpless and irritable without the stable presence of the alpha so much so that he feels practically resentful. Jesse has made it just fine without a scrap of help. The anxiety on being left --the joy on reunion. God, he doesn’t know why anybody would ever actively seek to be pregnant.

But, hell, they do.

He’s been reading ads all day from families that seem desperate for it. Willing to pay all this money and jump through all of these hoops for a kid that isn’t even theirs. There are dozens of them, too: wealthy couples looking for just one, or just one more, who can promise time and resources and love --Jesse doesn’t doubt their integrity. But he sort of hates them.

Not for their intentions. He just wonders where they were when his mother died.

It’s stupid. What does it matter now? He was a shitty kid anyway, and what’s important is that these folks are here now. He has a few names shortlisted --ones that sound honest and decent, even if he is a lousy judge of character. Some older couple in New Hampshire, some in Ireland with a few other kids already, a single beta in the remote stretches of Maine, by the sea.

They’re all a million miles from Jesse. But the blonde? Well, as far as Jesse can tell, he’s only up the
hall, in the harsh throes of heat.

And if the last place he’s ever gonna see Johnny’s eyes again are in some kid: well, he’d like to at least be look at them.

God, isn’t that a pathetic sort of thing to think? Johnny never even knew. He’d probably be mad about it --it was Johnny that took him to get fixed the first time, anway. That had been different, though: weeks after Jesse had presented, and a week after every damn alpha who so much as smoked the same brand of cigarettes as Deadlock’d had their fun with him.

Johnny only took him to help him. Found some place. Had him set up with Miss Marie. It’d been for the better, if not the best. Jesse had no money for doctors --hell, then, he didn’t even have a room at the motel, or a dime to his name. Let alone a dime for some kid.

Still, a few times when Johnny was around, turned away to dress after a fuck, or strolling around Jesse’s room smoking, or just lying there in bed side-by-side like a couple of cats in the heat, Jesse had wondered about if things had been different.

He’d had no damn clue, then --nor even when he met Gabriel, about the cosmic irony around the damn corner.

Here he is, all this time later, halfway across the world in an equally unwinnable situation, reading over the personnel file of the man he thinks will save him from this mess. John Thomas Morrison -- Strike Commander, despite his little Ω, and his modest hometown and his september birthday stamped into the slide.

He’s got the same kinds of information Gabriel, and Miss Ana did. Backlogs of military service. Awards. Achievements --though Jesse doesn’t bother to read them.

He’s more drawn to the picture used: how proud and masculine the man looks. How, there, he doesn’t seem remotely aware of what’s to come.

Jesse looks at it for a long time.

He doesn’t want to forget the face of what might be his best hope.

-

The heat tapers off, eventually.

Gabe has the grace to leave Jack after he comes out of the bathroom. Clean, finally --showered and scrubbed every last bit of sweat and slick and slander and smoke off of his body that he could. It had taken his all in energy: and he’d sat there on the floor of the shower for a long time afterwards.

The water never runs cold here. Back in the program, it was two minutes of hot water per day. Thrilling, in a way: like a race. Here it doesn’t matter if he stays in there forever. He wants to, almost.

He doesn’t.

He comes back into an empty room, and leans on the far wall. He only looks at the bed. Doesn’t approach, afraid to get comfortable. To let the mix of scents remind him of some time gone by. Gabe never used to leave: this was always the part where they’d talk about how things were going to be
and how they’d -- they’d be happy.

But Gabe left him all those months ago, freshly assigned to taking care of Deadlock, and maybe that’s when it all started to fall apart.

There are spare sheets in the linen closet. Jack changes them on his own, in the dim of the room. It’s been a long time since he’s had to do it, and there are moments when he wants to change his mind, and sit back on the bed and let himself surrender to it.

But he doesn’t. He bundles up the old sheets and puts them in the laundry basket where they can hurt him no longer. Because even if he feels weak and dehydrated and sore and not altogether there, he knows that it’s over, for now.

It means the wheels have to continue to turn, though. Tomorrow he’ll be back in his office to play at responsibility. He needs to be: Ana can’t keep doing this forever. Tending to Gabriel’s fires and Jack’s whenever he can’t face the day. She would have gone to the ends of the earth for him, and the worst thing of all is that he asked her to. That he still asks, in so many ways.

The best thing he can do is prepare. He fills up a glass of water, and drinks it on the way back to the bed. He opens a slide to see his desktop, as he prepares himself for his inbox, and makes himself available again. It’ll stop the flow of his traffic going to Ana. He can ground himself back in his work.

The inbox isn’t so bad, actually. Four-hundred, in the last two days. He can filter those by urgency and relevance, easily. Nothing of dire priority would be passed through without explicitly alerting him, so he thinks he’s been rightfully sleeping easy.

That is, until he sees the meeting request. Third from the top, nondescript and innocuous entirely, formatted entirely in the application’s default.

From: mccree, jesse (Blackwatch, Company B)

Subject: Formal Request of Meeting (Automated)

‘Please see enclosed timetable and annotate a suitable time.’

He thinks once more about Gabriel’s offer to him, all those weeks ago, and it hits him that the little Deadlock boy has been Ana’s charge, mostly. That Gabe wouldn’t have the guts to press the issue. Only one person he knows would, even if they were still licking their wounds.

So he realises he has word of his own to send.

‘I never meant to cause you pain.’

It takes him many hours to manage those six words.

- 

Apologies come in strange forms, that night.

Gabe has always got plenty to be sorry for, it seems. But he starts somewhere: in the place maybe he feels he belongs the most right now. Halfway across base, far from his own rooms, or of those he has
ever been in. There are a few company men in this wing, but he doesn’t go knocking for them.

The most basic part of his instinct brings him ‘home’ at Jesse’s door, and his better-seeing senses guide him there to say something for himself. Because he should have said goodbye, and he knows it. Should at least make one up now, if only to ease the kid.

If only to never have to witness him like he was in that hangar again: adrift, and at the mercy of an unknowable ocean.

He knocks, once, even if he’s got clearance. He does want this to be on Jesse’s terms. Though, it’s late and he hears no stirrings from within the room and the hall has a chill in it’s air that bites at the dampest parts of him. Gabe has been in and out of the shower, already --has had enough time to sit there and wonder about everything Jack said.

He’s not sure he really knows anything. If he ever has.

“Jesse?” He knocks again, gently. Jesse might not want to see him. Jesse might be asleep. “Kid, I know--...” He flattens his palm out against the door and sighs. “You got every right not to let me in.” That much is true. Hell, if the kid were of better sense he’d have kept his door locked to Gabriel a long time ago. “I know I was gone too long. It’s --I had to get something done.”

It’s not much of an excuse. If he were Jesse he’d probably still be angry: having heard nothing like an apology. Gabe doesn’t know what to say, though.

“You can hit me again, if you want.” He murmurs, with a slight laugh. “It’s only --I know I’d deserve it.” His head shakes. He still hear nothing from within the room, and he wonders if he’s even being listened to. “I am sorry, kid. For --for everything.”

Nothing, still. Radio silence: the same as Jesse endured for weeks. He supposes it’s only fair: and he tolerates it, for two minutes or so, before his head dips in frustration and his hand hovers over the access panel. “I’m gonna open the door.” He says, resolute. “Okay?”

Silence. As good as any reply he thinks he’s going to get, so he swipes up and the clearance goes through and the door shifts open almost soundlessly.

He doesn’t know what to expect: having ever been in Jesse’s private space, here, before. His mind has already conjured an image of bloody calico sheets, and stale air and distant neon. Moth-bitten curtains, dreamcatchers, whiskey and pills. Nothing like the impersonal inside that he comes upon: clean, and tidy like a room nobody lives in.

Johnny Ringo’s hat proudly on the dresser, as if awaiting it’s owners return. The same dreamcatcher over the bedpost. A pot of peanut butter on the nightstand, mostly empty. The bed: on which is Jesse, turned slightly on one side, out cold, snoring very gently.

Clothes on but under the covers, with a book at rest and open on his lap, having no heard a word Gabriel has said.

No love lost there. He can say it again. He can say it better.

He comes into the room and perches deftly on the edge of the mattress, if only to be close to the kid. Still handsome and boyish, even with his too-long hair half in his face. Gabe wonders if it’s worth
offering him a haircut. If it’s worth offering him an old t-shirt, or something, too. He knows he was away for a while, but it still surprises him that Jesse has gotten so much bigger.

Maybe that’s just because it never happened for Jack. He never --they never got to--...

Off in some mirror of their universe, he must have. Maybe there, they got it right, and they have that quiet house and those colourful rooms and things are how they were promised to be. Maybe there, Jesse never crossed paths with Gabe --that he’s still out there in the vast, dry heat, saving his money, trying to survive.

There’s not one instance in which all of them win that he can think of. Gabe would have to pick, and he’s never been any good at a crossroads.

And here he is, after somehow doing the worst by all of them, at Jesse’s bedside like all those months ago. He doesn’t know how to fix things, but he’s trying --for all their sakes. To respect Jesse’s wishes, and to give Jack the way out he’s wanted for years as best he can.

He tries not to think about it, too much. He moves the book out of Jesse’s lap for the sake of comfort --only recalling it after he’s seen the front, and it takes him all the way back to the crisis. It was of comfort to Ana when they went stretches without access to decent medical, and now it’s in Jesse’s hands.

It was supposed to be Jack’s, wasn’t it? He was supposed to inherit it, but fate is rarely so consistent.

It doesn’t matter now. Gabe folds down the corner of Jesse’s page. Thinks about getting into bed with the kid, just to hold him. Aches to wake him up and kiss him and tell him that he looks gorgeous like this, all soft and flush with life and that Gabe really is sorry and he won’t leave again and he’ll do better --he’ll try to.

But he doesn’t want to wake the kid. It doesn’t feel fair: to come in and out of his life at hours that suit him, with no input from Jesse.

So he doesn’t wake him at all. No, instead, he takes off his jacket and drapes it over the kid’s sleeping form. The scent might comfort him, and give him something to cling to. He leans up, and strokes the kid’s hair out of his eyes carefully, and leaves one light, hesitant kiss on his jaw.

The last thing he leaves is a note, on Jesse’s holoscreen. Something short. Simply, ‘breakfast, 9, S/50/CF?’.

It’s hard to leave the room --harder than Gabe expects. It feels like a space with the potential to be so intimate. There are enough sheets to make some kind of nest, and they could stay there for a while, at least. But he would have gone from one bed to another, then, and the contrast is uninviting and cruel.

He has work to do anyway. Company rosters to get back to running. Obligations beyond Jesse, and the baby in his stomach that’s supposed to be the size of an heirloom tomato, this week.

He leaves the kid in peace to sleep.

And Jesse sleeps the deepest and best he has for four whole weeks.
stuff is happening. i am so very busy.

warnings for like...minimal sex? and shameless self promotion bc hre' the link to my EP boyyys:

https://soundcloud.com/jfk-d/sets/ep-serenading-the-summit

my sincerest love to tiffany. u da one <3

The day begins with good news.

That is, good for some.

Gabe even gets an alert to it: wakes in the dark at twenty-seven past four to a brightening holoscreen that’s stretched wide with throbbing newsprint where relief seems to peek through a bamboo curtain. ‘Sojiro Shimada passed away in ancestral home this evening.’

It goes on: how he died (no foul play suspected), what public statements the clan have come forward with (none yet, officially), and their funeral arrangements (traditional, of course).

Deadlock have been shattered and their remains scattered to the southern winds. Los Muertos have been underground, practically, since the sting; and now the Shimada-gumi is effectively headless, even for five minutes. Gabe doesn’t know if it’s right to celebrate: he feels he takes some of the credit, with all the heat he’d slowly mounted and the pressure he’d put on the syndicate.

Maybe the stress squeezed the last essence out of the old, dirty bastard. Maybe it was something else --either way, Gabe won’t miss him, even if he did oversee the makings of some of the finest barbiturates circulating the black market.

It does nothing to explain the gap in knowledge: the outlier than is Belarus, and why stock is there, but that much becomes difficult to immediately worry about. Because he knows of Sojiro’s heirs, and it’s hard not to feel as if, in some small part, the Shimada-gumi has been toppled.

Gabe never can sleep after he’s been woke, though. Not easily.

He figures to start on work, then, anyway. Opens his map to see where his undercover agents are stationed, and what best to do with them now. It would be apt, he thinks; to ring in the death by slipping a few quiet blue pills and being able to drift back to sleep.

But, like a lot of things; he’s learning to live without.

With the sun, Jesse rises.
He’s always been sort of like that, in that he doesn’t so much mind the mornings. Back home, men would come through noon until midnight, and maybe it’s the quiet, peaceful solitude that’s wholly his that has him rousing, gently. He turns his head towards the little window; he can see the great looming mountain in some great detail this morning, as if it has inches closer. The sun is climbing over the shoulder of the peak.

He thinks about drowsing.

It’s something he’s fallen into these last weeks. The unmade bed doesn’t care if we wakes late. Nobody is going to worry is he stands under his shower jet until the stream runs cold and painful. The loneliness here is his, and that could be liberating; but not it feels more like some consuming task. Like he’ll never be done with it.

His head is still swimming with all that talk from Miss Amari. He’s got decisions and meetings and finalisations, and they all seem as beautiful and new as faraway things are until he turns onto his other side and feels some flutter in his stomach and wishes to God he knew the emotion it made him feel.

Didn’t it used to be fear? Jesse must have changed in some way when he wasn’t looking --when he was distracted by something else. Maybe he got mightier in his time here: braver to this cause, at peace with his circumstance. Maybe it’s the book, and the fact that he knows what he’s up against. That it’s not some great wave swelling in him as vast and wide as all things unknown, but the first modest twitches of the baby inside him.

More likely, it’s the jacket draped over his bed that he’s been sleeping with. He doesn’t even notice until he turns over and follows the dark and mysterious sleeve down to the rest of the garment. He recognises it instantly by the scent: like some Wednesday in Easter. Fragile as a column of smoke.

It’s only then he realises the absence in the Fear at the back of his brain. Lulled into a sense of safety by the lingering presence of the alpha, but alarmed by its sudden appearance. Jesse doesn’t recall seeing or hearing of Gabriel, and he’s normally keen on hearing his door being disturbed when he doesn’t want it to be. And he’d been awake, too, for a good part of the night, trying to do his best to read that book the little Miss had given him to get any idea of what’s to come next.

Gabriel must have come by later. Jesse must’ve fallen asleep; because the jacket is lying at rest next to him, and the book is closed on his nightstand and his mounted holoprojector is sort of flashing like it has some kind of news.

He closes his mouth and swallows. He presses the mount.

Three messages. The most recent is irrelevant, reading ‘general Blackwatch notice: requisitions now open this quarter’. The two others?

The other is a receipt of approval. That meeting, with Jack or John or whatever it is Jesse’s allowed to call the Commander of the place. This afternoon; in a part of the building Jesse doesn’t know.

It feels sudden. Jesse thinks it’s a good sign.

The second message, though, is distinctly Gabriel. No apology. No exposition. ‘breakfast, 9, S/50/CF?’ is all he cares to put.
But it relieves Jesse all the same. Hell, he doesn’t even believe in all that nonsense about lifelong bonds and mates and synced cycles and a lifetime’s worth of nonsense. It’s just some adaptation. A trick to keep people around. No, his tastes are simpler: a place of his own, and a vocation of his own, and for Gabriel to walk through his door now and again with the detached sort of cool he’s always had.

Breakfast is a start, at least. He’s hungry enough for it, but the meeting comes at the cost of all these clumsy words and conversations that Jesse nearly loses his appetite. He doesn’t much enjoy these sorts of meetings with Gabriel; the kinds after a long time apart. They’re always like his county jail visits were: with Jesse doing his best to be the breeze he once was, and Gabriel being so odd and elusive that Jesse thinks he has more of a character sketch of Gabriel than any real idea of who he is.

Johnny was so simple. Santa Fe was so simple. The recollection of the red rock of home gets rosier the further he is from it.

Jesse tries not to think about it. It’s not even gone eight yet, and he’s got a whole hour to lounge. He could shower or start filing his requisitions for some fitting clothes or do something productive, but the sun is coming out and he’d like to do nothing more than lay in the strip of light on the far side of his bed like some alley cat.

So he does: he stretches out and kicks off the sheets and gets comfortable on his side. It’s unideal: means that he’s facing the sun, but it’s not too bright, and it’d save him the utter discomfort of trying to lay on his front, or back. Too big to, now: and as far as he can tell from that over illustration on Little Miss’ book, this is supposed to be the easy part.

There aren’t any easy parts, he guesses. But it beats having some sour alpha kick his door in because some guys just can’t bear the word ‘no’.

He does fall asleep like that, too: not deeply, but enough so that he can feel the passage of time. The sun only climbs higher, and the light only grows brighter, and the shadow and the sharp, great mountain begins to advance at Jesse.

When he does wake, for good, it’s not due to the time or the brightness or the way he’s laid, but instead by the insistence of hunger that becomes indistinguishable from the fluttering of his stomach. Stupidly, he thinks he’s probably not the only one who’s hungry, shaking his head with some quiet resignation.

“Awright,” He murmurs, softly. “I’m gettin’.”

It feels strange to say. To be thinking of the baby as a person, and not a concept. Jesse doesn’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing or just some inevitability.

But as he pulls on the last shirt he has, he thinks; well, at least it makes him feel less alone.

- 

Some parts are more important than others. First and last looks, for example.

The first flicker off expression on a new target: or the last look of light in their eyes when they die. That first look after Jack’s inauguration; distance and strange like finding oneself in a cloud funhouse mirror.
Fewer, and fresher a wound: that very last look of the very last time, with Jack’s eyes in the dark and his form beneath Gabriel and this understanding on the horizon of blue, there. There was nothing between them.

Gabe feels like a collector of these looks. He can still remember some of Jesse’s: how the kid had opened his door only a few inches and had sized him up the first time they met. What was supposed to be the last was leaving that motel on the night of it all: how Jesse had been so vulnerable, glowing and unstable as some isotope in the dark. As hurt as he’d been angry. And as angry as he’d been expecting it.

When he comes upon the cafeteria, after most of the madding morning crowd has thinned out, he sees Jesse across the way, sat leaning on one hand, and stabbing at his food idly. Hair too-long, and his face all soft and hairless with that spike of gestational hormones that make him look his age, at last.

The kid has always been sensitive to the eyes that fall on him, and the way they do. He’s quick to sense it, and to look up. It takes less than three seconds for him to find Gabe with his eyes.

How different he looks from that first look. No sizing-up, or bravado, or half-sneer like he had Gabe pegged before any words had been exchanged. Nothing like that first look in the county-jail: somewhere between a headlight-blind deer and the hunter stalking it.

There are parts that you keep, in it all. Parts that get thrown away, or changed.

Gabe will preserve this look for a long time.

Recognition. Faint anger, warring relief. It breaks, then, amazingly --astonishingly; to a smile. The kid scoots in a little, and with that gesture, Gabe knows the kid won’t hurt him. Knows that in Jesse’s atmosphere, he’s welcome once more. He crosses the room trying to hide the hurry he finds himself in. To himself, though, there’s no real denying it, and the way he feels just a little bit lighter and ten years younger all at once just by seeing the way Jesse is wearing the jacket: hiding in its sleeves.

He’s got his witticism ready, too, by the time Gabe is coming to sit down by him, nudging what looks like oatmeal around his bowl playfully. “Fancy seein’ you on this side a’ earth.” he quips, looking up. Getting that accusation out of the way. “What brought’cha back?”

Gabe pulls out the chair, and takes a seat before the kid. The scent that greets him is so warm and residual: like steam on a windowpane; seductive and bitter all at once. The sarsaparilla remains the same, but less dry: green roots of life having fully emerged through the dusty red floor of the desert.

He looks at the kid fondly; how he’s got that look of confidence, faked or not. He gets a vision of Jack, then, a vision from twenty years ago that grips him fully for a second.

“I was--” He looks away, for a second. “There were some things I had to finish.”

That much, at least, is true. And Jesse has been in this racket long enough to know it’s better not to ask. Not about that, anyway.

But his voice does get all soft with a childlike nostalgia when he murmurs, “You go back down to Santa Fe, Gabriel?”

He shakes his head ‘no’. There’s nothing left there for him, or anyone. It’s not his land. “Belarus.”
He says --honest with the kid. What does it matter? He is Blackwatch. “Had some loose ends they wanted me chasing.”

Jesse has some look of understanding that seems unexpected. There’s still some sharpness, there, though, and he has no bones about making that clear in saying, “Didn’t know they could even give you orders.” He looks down at his food and then up again. “You know any other tricks like that?”

Gabe huffs. He feels aware of all else in the room: it’s the only thing keeping him from shooting a hand across the table just to touch the kid. What can he say? The sweetness of the kid’s scent is getting to him, and maybe that’s why he feels every pair of eyes so much more personally: some tick in his hindbrain that makes him want to possess Jesse solely, and make him safe and comfortable.

It’s only a little thing, though. He can stifle it.

“Afraid I don’t.” He says, gently. Appraises the kid with his eyes once more, and he can see all of these changes: how the kid’s hair is thicker and his face is more colourful and there’s less darkness around his eyes and how, most of all, he has to sit a little bit back from the table to make room for his growing stomach. Gabe can’t even help but say it. “You look well.”

Jesse won’t let that remark even land. “Oh, sure.” He says, with a roll of his eyes. “I know how I look, Gabriel.” And that’s what tells Gabe that the kid doesn’t have a clue how he actually looks --or the effect he has, on people.

Gabe wants to tell him. But he doesn’t get to.

“Must’a been cold,” Jesse turns the conversation quickly. He looks as if the old talk made him uncomfortable. “In Belarus, I mean.” He takes a sheepish bite of food, and talks around it crassly. “S’what Johnny always said about it.”

Now that --that gives Gabriel pause. He wonders about old shipping containers and inventories with that Deadlock brand stamped on to them. He’d never even thought to ask the damn kid --nobody had. “Sounds like Johnny Ringo got around more than I thought.”

At that, Jesse shrugs. There’s no flinching at the name. Gabe is hoping that phantom limb will wear off soon, and Jesse will grow numb to it. Because, really, he isn’t sorry about how it happened.

The kid swallows his food. “Even smalltime is some time.” He says, blandly. “That Shimada lot were funny about deals, y’know? Wanted it all done in person.” The kid looks around the room as if sensing the place, suddenly. About how casually he talks of old bedfellows that now oppose him. “Well, they never sent me. S’just what I heard.”

Gabe frowns. “Why Belarus?”

Jesse looks up at him. He speaks as if twice in meaning. “Neutral territory.” He explains. “No Yakuza gonna pop outta the shadows, or street gangs or anythin’ like that.” It’s then he sort of laughs. “See, the rest of us --we all knew what we were. But you’da got your hands cut right off at suggestin’ that Shimada crowd weren’t nothin’ but businessmen.”

It’s funny to Jesse --but all Gabe can think about is the morning newsprint, and the vulnerability of Hanamura. About the kids that prowl the alleys in Mexico and the snake holes dotted in the ground out in the red rock and all they are likely to still be hiding. All of them, drawn together in Belarus? He could clear the sky with a single stone.
He doesn’t realise he’s so lost to it until he feels a kick to his shin. Jesse is looking at him boredly. “Now I know this ain’t all you came here t’talk to me about.”

The words are sort of a threat. Jesse has been effectively marooned for weeks and Gabe is here talking shop like the kid is just another company man, and not across from him. Blossoming with radiance and life, visibly with (his?) child.

Gabe’s head drops a little bit. He huffs a small laugh. “I’m sorry.” He says (not realising it’s the easiest an apology has ever come to him in his life). “I guess I just thought you’d be more--”

The kid bristles, a little. “Careful what you wish for.” But it doesn’t last very long before his form relaxes and Jesse looks almost sad. “Can’t we --ain’t there somewhere else we can do this? Someplace jus’ me an’ you?” He swallows. There’s a tremulousness to it. “An’ we don’t talk about all that stuff. We --we jus’--...”

It’s the way he says it that aches a large part of Gabe. He can take anger: he’d shouldered and suffered all of Jack’s twinges and temper for long enough. But the vulnerability of it: of the sadness, and fragility --it could crush him like a small bug, he swears.

“Yeah,” He says, before he can really think. “Yeah, of course.” There’s no resistance in him to it, and for once Jesse doesn’t have some remark to fire back. No, instead, relief: the kid softens in his posture and his eyes look warmer for it. He waits on Gabe, seemingly, to forgo the idea of coffee or food, and instead get up.

He watches Jesse take another quick sort of bite of his food (it’s calming to watch, but Gabe doesn’t really want to investigate why), before he swivels his legs around the bench he’s on. He watches to kid use one arm to push off the table and the other to steady his back. He thinks about scooping the kid up to carry him.

Remembers the first and only time he has --scooping the body off of the floor, unready to bury it.

But the kid has the audacity to look happy even sometimes, somehow; and Gabe doesn’t know how.

Jesse notices the look. He doesn’t seem to know what to do with it. “After you.” He says, quietly. Gabe is happy to lead.

He supposes about how it looks, as he leads them out. There are none of his company men in there -- only Overwatch agents that look dully, with no recognition in their eyes, really. How wonders: how do they see the kid? Do they see him? How many of them can guess at the full picture?

He and Jack had never really been public: not that it ever stemmed speculation about anything. He can recall public insinuations about the two of them. Can recall one in particular that had accompanied some picture of Jack holding a car door open for Ana. At the time, he’d laughed --what an idea it had been.

To recall it now is something strange. He doesn’t know why, but he feels for her.

Of all the stupid things.

Gabe’s sheets will still hold the ghost of the man he loved. He wants to be in Jesse’s space. That’s where he takes them, in the end.
The kid knows his way around by now, it seems. The moment they even turn down his corridor, his head shakes. “I hate this goddamn room.” He says.

Gabe laughs. “Me, too.”

It doesn’t stop him from going inside: hit by some recollection of New Mexico in the way the air hold Jesse’s scent. In the way the hat is still on the dresser, with the book, and the old dream catcher. Pieces of old life that blend perfectly with things to come. It’s only when he’s inside that he realises Jesse is still standing in the open door.

The kid looks a little lost, for a second. Then he speaks. “Y’came by, last night.”

Gabe nods. “I did.”

Jesse nods back, a little. He swallows like the whole thing is upsetting. Like it hurts him. “Why--...” Even his voice, breaks a little. He coughs as if to cover it. “Why didn’t y’wake me?”

It’s an odd question. The image of Jesse, completely at rest, feels too sacred to disturb to him. Never mind all the complications --all the things Gabe would have to say, and how he’d have to say them. He doesn’t; even now. “C’mon.” He jokes, instead. “I know how hard a good night’s sleep must be for you.”

Jesse tries to laugh at it. He still sounds like he’s holding back some immense sadness. Gabe attributes it to his own sins.

And now what it is: the effect his scent has on Jesse, and all those hormones and the fact that nobody else has ever given him that. Nobody has ever let him be completely vulnerable, and not used him, anyway.

No, Gabe doesn’t get it, so he goes towards the unmade bed and perches on it. “C’mon.” He says, by way of anything else. “Give your feet a rest.”

Jesse coughs again as he comes towards the bed: bravado. Trying to get his voice back. “M’feet are fine.” He makes sure to tread on Gabe’s shoe as he crawls carelessly on the bed. He’s on his side, immediately, curled in towards Gabe but not quite touching him yet. “I don’t know about yours, old man.” He laughs, airily, as the alpha gets more onto the bed.

Gabe can still lie on his back. He does: Jesse adjusts to lay on him, head on chest, flush together. He laughs again. “Y’told me you were ‘south a’ forty’ the first time you met me.” The kid mentions.

Gabe doesn’t really recall. He’s distracted by the implicit permission of it all --how one of his hands is playing sort of idly with Jesse’s hair. How warm the kid is. “I tell you that?” He asks, impassively.

Jesse makes a noise of confirmation in his throat. “I figured you for married --but never a liar.” He jokes. “Never from California, neither.”

It gives Gabe pause enough to try to look to the kid’s face. “You been reading my Wikipedia page?”

The kid shrugs. “Somethin’ like that.”

Gabe shakes his head. “Can’t have been a page-turner.”
“It weren’t.” Jesse replies almost instantly. He huffs out a laugh again. “How can y’re blame me? I can’t ever get any answers outta you about anythin’--not even little things.” The kid angles his neck. Looks up at Gabe plainly.

It feels intimate in a strange way. “There’s not much to say.” Gabe says, weakly.

Jesse grins like a shark, with his head still on Gabe’s chest. “I heard once that your heart gets faster when you’re lyin’.” He blinks, then, beguiling and slow, suddenly once again aware of what he’s capable of. “Or when you’re lookin’ at somethin’ y’like.”

Is his heart going faster? He thinks it’s practically still, gazing at the kid, frozen in admiration and adoration and the desire to protect. He wants Jesse to hold his gaze. He wants to kiss the kid.

But he never says it, and it’s too late when Jesse looks away with a little frown. He shifts, uncomfortably. “Y’feel that?”

Gabe doesn’t know at all what the kid is talking about until he realises that Jesse’s stomach is pressed against his side, and that’s what Jesse’s looking at. “Feel what?”

“Think somebody’s tryna greet ya.” The kid mumbles.

It’s only a little thing. Stupid, really--but it hits Gabe somewhere in the cage of his chest too directly to play it cool. And then he’s moving his hang anyway, tracing from other the kid’s delicate spine to the warm swell of his belly. He still doesn’t feel anything--doesn’t really expect to, but it’s about more than that.

Jesse’s head drops against him again, as if completely at ease. “I gotta meet somebody later today.” The kid murmurs. “’Bout taking the baby, n’all.”

Gabe already knows, before he puts a conscious face and name to it. It feels like justice and loss, all at once. He hopes they agree. He hopes they disagree. He wishes things were different. He wishes he could want, openly, without it coercing Jesse into some life that isn’t made for somebody so young.

Gabe swallows. “Hopeful?” He asks.

The kid nods. “Think so.” He doesn’t look up. “I’m trying not to--t’make any choices too fast, but y’gotta be quick with this stuff.” He swallows, them, sounding once more sort of torn. “It’s what Miss Marie always said, anyway.”

There’s no counsel of hers that ever existed for Jesse’s benefit. Gabe knows that. “What’d she say?”

The kid shrugs. “Jus’--y’know, how bein’ this way makes y’think y’want it, because a’ all the changes an’ hormones an’ stuff.” He sounds like he’s said this bit before. Like he’s been trained on it. “That’s how nature is, I guess: it’s gotta get hold a’you an’ make y’crazy, or nobody’d have any babies, and there’d be no people left, I guess.”

It’s--confusing. Makes sense to hear it from Jesse. It probably made him better at what he did. Gabe can’t speak for if it’s true: not from what he knows of Jack. What he knows of himself.

He’s curious. “You think that’s true for everybody?”
Jesse shrugs again. “Well, sure. That’s why we have all this nonsense about mates an’ designations, ain’t it? For survival.”

Fifteen years. Quiet houses. Visions of different futures and that bottom draw grave for the navy blue onesie for a baby that was never really a baby. Gabe tries to speak. “So, not for--” But he bites his own cheek to avoid sounding so bereft.

Jesse gets it, anyway. “What, for love?” The kid huffs some small laugh. “Thought I was supposed to be the naive one.” His head shakes and he looks up at Gabriel again with some conflicted expression. “I seen too many boys like me goin’ around with those kinda delusions.” His head shakes. “Lucky for you, Gabriel, I never liked to fool myself into thinking y’were in love with me.”

Gabe doesn’t know why the words are painful to hear. He doesn’t deserve the kid’s love --not after everything. Doesn’t deserve Jack’s, either.

But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t long for it.

He hides that part of things. Like he’s learned to, after all these years, ruffling the kid’s hair absently. “Smart kid.” He says, swallowing the dagger that’s making his throat tighten. “Who needs a haircut.”

Jesse huffs a little. “Yeah, yeah.” He says, dismissively. “Ain’t exactly been top a’ my priorities.” He shifts again like he’s uncomfortable. Moves until he’s sort of nosing into Gabriel’s neck. His eyes close. “I gotta do my requisitions an’ have all these important conversations an’ appointments.” He sighs. “An’ you been on holiday.”

Gabe strokes over the kid’s hair with his other hand. He keeps the first on Jesse’s stomach. “I’ll send you a postcard next time.” He says, weakly.

The kid clicks his tongue. “Not even somethin’ from the duty free? What a grift.”

He laughs, then. They both do.

Gabe is aware of the meeting he has, later, about the company roster. He’s aware that he can’t stay here forever. Maybe that’s what makes him bold enough to twist his head and take the kid into a kiss --a real one. Jesse doesn’t resist him in the slightest. Gives as good as he gets, really.

And when it’s over, and the kid is looking at him with heavy, dark eyes, he wonders if Jesse knows his heart and all he’s doing to try and hide it.

Maybe not. The kid never did figure him for a liar.

For some reason, though, it surprises him when Jesse huffs out of the side of his mouth and clamps his one hand tight on Gabriel’s shoulder. “C’mon, Gabriel.” He murmurs, with a voice as sultry and intangible as steam. “I never took y’for a prude.”

He practically doesn’t know what the kid means until he becomes very aware of where Jesse’s other hand is: pressing with a generous amount of pressure, his fingertips working round the shapes there. Hasn’t lost a step from his old life, has he?

“Jesse--” He begins, as if he can find some basis for any objection. “We--”
“Ssh.” The kid gets out through his teeth, in some menacing and delightful way. “I know y’veen in
the wars. Jus’ lie back for me.” Even as he’s speaking, he can feel Jesse’s hand forcing his shoulder,
flat-palmed, as if to keep him down. As if he could, physically. No: all the kid has to do is say it in
the very way he’s said it, and he could hold Gabe down with the tips of his fingers.

Whatever he’s thinking to say, then, is utter abducted from him when the kid starts to move down his
body, nosing innocuously until he’s at the soft line of hair at Gabe’s navel where his shirt has ridden
up. Jesse looks as preoccupied as he’s ever looked, singular in focus, barely aware of Gabe’s
presence until he lifts his eyes and they look hard at one another.

Jesse doesn’t break his gaze as he licks a stripe from Gabe’s hipbone and down to the line of where
his underwear peaks out from over his pants. To scent him like this is some world-ending and
derived thrill. Jesse is so present and gorgeous and ripe: and for all of his looks beneath neon light, he
has never looked more desirable.

Gabe feels helpless as he looks down, half-hard, dry in the mouth. He murmurs, “Kid--”

Jesse smiles like a predator. “Four weeks is a long time.”

And then he’s saying nothing at all, inhaling in delight the moment his hand breaks down into the
humid warmth of Gabe’s underwear and grasps at his cock --gentle, impatient. He squeezes a few
times, and starts working his wrist up and down in a lax and languid motion. He’s hesitant to move
his other hand from Gabe’s shoulder like he believes Gabe is somehow resistant. No longer --he
doesn’t dare to move an inch when Jesse peels back his pants and underwear, only down to the
middle of his thighs.

Gabe breathes in through his teeth. It’s not exactly as if he’s gone without like Jesse: but the kid is a
delicacy to him. Enjoyed only once-before.

How his heart isn’t across the room, listening out for the door. Not reliving visions of Jack, just this
once, and he’s fully there for the second that Jesse make some low noise of desire and takes most of
Gabe’s cock into his mouth, smooth and easy.

Christ Jesus: it’s so warm and wet and heavenly that Gabe practically bucks his hips at the first damn
instance. Hears Jesse make some muffled noise of what’s likely laughter, but the kid doesn’t dare
stop. He must want it bad: with no restraint for the noise he’s making, or the fucking mess.

Gabe thinks he must be steaming at the ears by the time Jesse pulls away, string of spit on his lips
and this hazy look on his face like he’s home.

One of his hands moves back --and Gabe only realises the kid is halfway-undressing too when Jesse
is above him, getting his hips in line.

“No like that,” The kid says gently, like Gabe is the only who needs encouragement. “Stay jus’ like
that.”

And then he sinks down.

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Jack checks over his face in a bathroom mirror.
It’s not possible for him to look as tired as he feels. As nervous, or conflicted: but he looks halfway to hell. And that’s close enough.

He remembers being like this the morning of the inaugural ceremony. Younger, of course, with some residual sort of optimism that kept him upright. Jack thinks he might as well only be standing out of habit. Only breathing out of habit, too. Stubborn enough to exist.

It’s not a similar thing, though. Not a public appearance cast live to the whole world. Not some meeting with a government official that half of the world hinges on, nor a press conference or a public execution. No, by now, he’s ready for all those things and worse. Has been through hell and paradise alike; he just never thought his bridge to that future, and those quiet houses, would be like this: having to find the words to ask for somebody else’s child.

The world is like that, of course. Turns on a dime.

And he’d be over it if only this didn’t feel like a last chance. That’s the scariest thought of all. Jack knows he doesn’t want to be here forever: least of all alone. The string that kept he and Gabe tied together has come loose, or it’s been cut. He doesn’t blame Ana for her distance.

Maybe Jack doesn’t know what else he’s good for. What he’d mean outside of this place --but he’d rather be meaningless than stay here like this.

He looks over himself again. He still has ten minutes or so. It’s just a meeting --he’s met the kid before. Jesse has to be at least aware of him. Won’t that make it easier? Oh, God; what if that make it worse? God knows the little deadlock omega has every reason to despise Overwatch and all that’s represented by Jack. They took his home. They took his people.

And now it’s going to look like they’re asking for his baby, too.

Jack exhales. It’s not like that. They’re both reasonable. They both know what it is to be in a situation with no clear victory, and he bets if he were to know the kid for a conversation more; he’d find a Gabriel-shaped hole in his life that matches the one in his own.

He swallows again. He takes the small box off of the sink counter next to him: undisturbed as the day it had arrived in its cardboard shipping packaging. There’s nothing he can do to feel more prepared: and he accepts that. In the same breath that he walks out of the door, and back out onto the top floor.


It’s always quiet, every time he’s been here. Lovely, too. It’s mainly for research, rather than leisure, and it means that not just anybody can stroll up unless they have clearance for it. The lush and vibrant greens exist regardless of the summer rain or the winter sun. Consistent and independent of it all. It’s something to aspire to.

He’s waiting anxiously on a bench beneath some palm fronds when he hears the soft chime of the elevator, and looks up at the doors.

It surprises him that the first thing he sees is not the little deadlock boy --but Angela: the face of his every disappointment. He takes a full few seconds to watch as she isn’t the one to step out at all --but Jesse, from behind her, who looks as if he is thanking her before turning towards the enormous and
airy room with bewilderment.

He notes the hat --of all things, first. How his hair beneath it is a little wet like he’s fresh from the shower.

Jack doesn’t note the look Angela is giving him before the elevator doors close. Preoccupied with the boy, and this feeling of pain he thought he’d forgotten on seeing a mirror of all the things that should be his. He should have that same glow to his features. The same softness in his features.

(He should be that pregnant.)

They are too far up the road Jack wasn’t meant to take, though. He’s still where he shouldn't be, and has been for so long that he can no longer even imagine the giddy haze of the few weeks he was allowed to have. Enough time has passed that he thought maybe this wouldn’t hurt so much. But Jack feels the bitter sting of jealousy every bit as keenly as the lightness of hope.

He stands, a little sheepishly, to get the kid’s attention. Jesse’s eyes settle on him after a second.

The kid has clearly acclimatised since he first arrived, and Jack can see that in the way he snaps some little half-salute. No doubt that owes thanks to a reminder from Angela, or Fareeha. It’s not a bad thing, on the face of it --but the reminder of the disparity of power, here, sits distinctly wrong.

He realises, as Jesse stops short of him, that he has to say something.

He has no idea how this conversation begins.

“C’mmander.” It’s the kid who starts, though, and a far fucking cry from that sharp and sly tone he’d worn in that county jail. He sounds as nervous as Jack feels. “This, uh --ain’t what I expected.”

Jack’s jaw works a little. He strives for some breezy tone --breezy, in the face of this kid. A thief of biblical proportions. The one with Gabe’s heart on his sleeve. This isn’t about the past, though. “I didn’t think an office would be the best place for us to speak.” He says, tightly.

The kid drags his feet, childishly. “We’d a’ both felt more at home speakin’ through some bars, I’m sure.” It’s a joke, as far as Jack can tell. Not one he’s sure he can appreciate: all it does is serve to remind him of their first meeting, and how he’d had no clue. Too preoccupied, wasn’t he? Blind.

He can see the kid appraising the life in the green around him with the same look of wonderment. Like he’s never seen anything of the sort. Jack realises, he likely hasn’t. Not between all of the branches that clutch and the red rock of where they’d found him. It helps to temper his jealousy. To fade it.

The kid turns and looks at him. “What is this place, anyway?”

Jack gestures, a little impassively, before reminding himself to be warmer. “This is a research garden.” He says, striving for a friendly sort of tone. “It’s a good place to take a walk.”

The kid nods his head in understanding. His thumbs are hitched into his belt loops and he takes a few paces around, in some semicircle, like he doesn’t know if he wants to walk away or not. Jack doesn’t interrupt it, and they extend the silence as if both hesitant of scaring the other off.

It occurs to Jack to lead the interaction. He has to look beyond all that he’s feeling. What the hell
does the kid know of or care for what Jack has known, and lost, and longed for? He’s just a kid, dragged to some place he doesn’t belong on the fool’s errand of following Gabriel Reyes.

(Jack remembers being twenty-one in Detroit, out past the edge of the universe because he’d followed the same man. He knows the feeling: more or less.)

“I understand,” he swallows, “That you’ve been assigned a Company.” He looks over at the kid. “How are you finding it?”

Jesse shrugs with the passive shyness of a kid never much his age, and completely without that southern hospitality that so many others know him for. “S’alright.” He says, eventually --quietly, too, the opposite of how Jack has known him in that county interrogation room. “I ain’t got too much to do, I guess.”

Of course, he wouldn't. Not with Blackwatch having been on and off suspension. Even if he were on active duty, they’ve not had any need for a marksman (assassin, really). No doubt with Gabe having blown back in from the rusted fringe of the iron curtain, there’s going to be something coming up: but Jesse won’t be cleared for anything on the ground until next spring, at earliest.

“Make the most of it,” Jack says, trying to sound more amicable than acerbic. “A shooter like you won’t be grounded for very long once you’re on active.” it’s an earnest compliment that doesn’t take too much to reach. Jack has never had any difficulty respecting competency.

If Jesse hears it as praise or not isn’t clear. He moves one shoulder like he’s sort of shrugging again. “Sure hope I still got it by then.”

It’s not clear if it’s a genuine concern or he’s just making conversation. Jack doesn’t know how to read him. “I wouldn’t worry.” He says, almost automatically and perhaps more antipathetic than he means. “Captain Amari took time out of the field for Fareeha and never lost a step.” He says --trying not to recall it too vividly. “It’s like riding a bicycle.”

The kid lets out some laugh. “I never ridden a bicycle.” He must note the awkward vacancy that overtakes Jack, and in the realisation that neither of them know quite what to say, Jesse waves a hand. “But I --I get the idea.”

Jesse wanders ahead, then, taking one of the little paths that passes through more of the tropical section and out near where the alpine plants are. He’s looking around only mildly, meandering more than going with purpose. It’s a lot to take in --not just the garden, but the country and the institution and the context of which they’re both painfully aware.

The kid’s shirt barely fits: his shoes aren’t laced and he carries the faint smell of cigarettes and Jack wishes he could temper that hot feeling that boils his insides to think of how careful he’d been in comparison.

Jealousy: hot and childish that blooms until it falters and Jack looks around.

He thinks of this magnificent building that he can roam freely. He thinks of the little red bicycle he used to ride to school. Is it that he’s jealous? Is he really desperate to have his title and freedom and dignity stripped from him like Jesse, forced to toil in the belief that a cool breeze and a dirty mattress pad and Gabriel Reyes breathing in his ear is the best it gets?

Jack is transfixed by a small hole in the bottom of the kid’s shirt. He realises his own luck in that
moment.

And he sort of despises; it in the same breath he’s grateful for it.

He catches up a few paces, but doesn’t yet walk alongside the kid. Like he’s trying to give him as much space as possible.

“Otherwise,” he says, gently. “How are you feeling?”

The kid turns his head, frowning, like the question is odd, or he suspects it to be a trick. “How d’you mean?” It, in turn, causes Jack to pause is trying to assess what he should say. He wonders if the kid’s confusion is just that he’s not often asked how he is. ‘How much?’ is more likely to be common.

Jack is about to clarify when Jesse nods. “Y’mean like--” His mouth hesitates around a clumsy word. “--physically?” The kid’s shoulders rise a little like he’s embarrassed, or somehow ranks admission of his apparent pregnancy to that of some misdemeanour.

Jack is gentle with it. Doesn’t press: nodding only to say. “Physically.” There’s a hint of appreciation in the way the kid’s mouth tugs at one corner in the faint suggestion of a smile. He’s been offered so few kindnesses that it’s a miracle he recognises them.

“Uh,” the kid scratches a part of his jaw absently. “No real complaints.” It’s said breezily, which is to say, with a degree of uncertainty. “Guess I can’t say too much more ‘til Monday.” He stops his meandering, then, and turns so he’s at least halfway-facing Jack. It seems he doesn't know quite where to look until he raises his head and regards Jack as coolly as one can. “Guess that’s why we’re both here.”

Jack doesn’t have any grounds to feel as blindsided as he does. Thought this meeting would be --pastoral, or something. That they could at least establish an easy conversation before bargaining. He has no grace, here, in the face of his last exit: he’ll plead if it comes to it.

He swallows. Leans heavy on one side.

Jesse does the talking.

“Look,” The kid says, sounding strangely soft, “I don’t mean to pick a scab or nothin’, but when I met you --before, in the county lockup. You --y’were--...” The kid’s eyes cut up and down Jack’s body, like that’s somehow more delicate than just saying it.

The silence is worse, somehow. Jack feels like he’s there, again.

“I was.” He says, eventually. Near-silently.

The kid takes an audible sort of breath in, like he’s there too. Like he has any idea. Jack can’t even articulate the loss, still --doesn’t even know if there’s language for it. For the loss of one so beloved, and one so unfamiliar: more mythology than memories, as if that eases it any. Sudden and unexpected as the darkness of a power cut, characterised by that moment of sickly surprise in which one squints. Forced to readjust the way they see and experience their world.

Jack doesn’t know of the kid’s life. Maybe he does know.
But if he doesn’t; then he can’t possibly imagine.

Eventually, Jesse murmurs, “I’m sorry.” It’s an apology Jack can take for all the wrong the kid has done or allowed, even if it’s not this, and even if he’s blithely unaware.

Jack nods his head. He doesn’t think he can say anything right away, for the moment. It occurs to him to say ‘it’s not your fault’: but that only hurts him worse.

It doesn’t matter, anyway, when Jesse swallows and says, “I been readin’ about you, C’mmander.” He speaks gently, like he’s aware of the danger of the conversation. “I --I didn’t know who y’were before, an’ the Little Miss said how you’d wanted a baby for so long, an’ I started readin’, an’ then I --I realized--...” He drops his head out of some kind of respect, or commiseration.

Then he shakes his head, and murmurs, “Well, I never figured somebody could so lucky an’ so unlucky, all at once.”

Jack makes some small noise that might be a huff of laughter. It sounds like anguish.

He says, “Me either.”

They look at each other for the first time, fully. It only occurs to Jack, then, how young the kid really is. Prison had made him seem older, somehow --the tattoo and the sneer and all that. But here he is exactly as he appears: a kid, and nothing else. An apple striving to fall further from its tree.

Jack remembers himself. He brings the small box out from under his arm and out towards the kid.

“I didn’t know what you’d requisitioned.” He says, trying to sound impartial. “But I thought this might be useful to you.” What he doesn’t say is ‘this was supposed to be mine’. God, by now, it doesn’t even bear saying.

Jesse doesn’t hesitate too long to take the box, clearly curious. His face doesn’t well mask the clear gratitude or pleasure of the gesture. “I do happen to like getting gifts from strange men.” He says, pausing to look up to smile. Jack does his best not to read into the statement.

It’s not an elaborate gift. Nor the kind the kid is used to. Jack never even got to open it, and he only recalls the details of the thing when Jess is through the packaging, his fingers past cardboard and tissue paper and down to the soft and innocent white corner of a swaddling blanket.

There’s a moment of vacancy when Jesse looks a bit blank, pulling the thing out in its entirety to get an idea of what it is. Pure cotton, and untouched. Not a hint of scent of ownership on it, and there lies the real tragedy. It’s some tradition Jack had been excited for: to sleep with the fabric between he and Gabriel so that even in the first few moments of life, their child would recognise them both.

At least it will be of use to somebody, now.

Jesse looks at it for a while before he looks back at Jack. Folds the things over his arm one-handed and dips his head like he doesn’t know what to say. “Y’didn’t have to get me anythin’.”

Jack’s turn to work one shoulder. “Think nothing of it.”

He probably doesn’t appreciate how difficult that is for a kid who’s been given so very little. Jesse doesn’t look ready to let it go, really, as he looks over it and then back to Jack. He starts them off
again with a few slow steps, looking almost wistful for a second. “Y’know, you’re sweet.” He says, quietly. “Y’look a bit like a fella I used to know. Name a’ Johnny.”

The name rings no bell to Jack. Not important enough to grace an index of casualties he’d seen before or after the sting, or the raid on that little bunny ranch.

Jesse cocks his head a little. “Y’mind if i call you Johnny?”

Jack shakes his. “Not at all.”

The nature of the plants here has changed. No longer long and elegant fronds and the slim, bare trunks of palms, but the sharp and emaciated shape of cacti and the strange purple-blue of desert sage. Jesse looks over them without any real familiarity, passive to the bright gold of the marigold and the white of the lily.

No, he looks distracted by something else until he lets out a quiet noise of desperation. “Can I be honest with you, then, Johnny?”

Jack is a step or two behind, appraising the kid carefully. “By all means.” He says.

Not that it spurs Jesse on, who holds his hesitation for a good six or seven seconds before he swallows. “I seen others.” He says, at last, in this odd, pinched voice. “Other people that want a baby. Good people.”

Something cold thrills in Jack. His memory of that quiet house gets a little less clear in his mind’s eye. He says nothing.

“They’re in all kindsa places. I seen some in --in Maine. Ireland. New Hampshire.” The kid shakes his head. “But you --you’re right here.”

Jack thinks of biting his tongue, but how can he? It’s not his instinct to lie to Jesse. If he did, then what? Jesse could just as soon change his mind back as he could make it up to begin with. So he coughs, and says, “On active duty, you’re liable to be moved a lot.” He hesitates on what he’s trying to say. “There’s no guarantee we’ll be on the same hemisphere.”

The kid shakes his head. “You’re missin’ my point.” His mouth opens and shuts and for a second the kid looks almost pained, as if his frustration at not being able to get the word out is physical. Eventually, though, he manages. “Pickin’ from a bunch of strangers, and getting the odd letter, or meeting once or twice,” He swallows. “There’s --there’s no trust there.”

There’s a sort of forlornness, then, that Jack hadn’t been expecting. Had thought the kid would he looking, desperately, for a way out, and not deeply, or meaningfully. Not for the first time, he realises, he’s underestimated the kid, and his capacity to feel.

Jesse’s chin drops and he shrugs again like he’s at some loss. “Givin’ this kid to any one a’ them is jus’ me hopin’ they don’t string me along.” It’s said with the sharp tone of a kid that knows the duplicity of the entire world. “Maybe most of ‘em wont. But I been through the system before.” He laughs, then, out of nowhere, like he’s forgotten all of the darkness he seemed to be recalling only seconds before.

“An’ I’ll be honest with you.” He looks at Jack. Meets his eye. “I’m a lousy judge a’ character.”
The overlap there is clear, if the kid knows it or not, and Jack finds himself disarmed, then, into agreeing (whether he knows it or not).

He lets out a small breath of laughter. “I can’t say I’m a great one, either.”

Jesse smiles to it like a string that resonates by musical sympathy alone; all the while so ignorant to the way their histories have kept intertwining as if joined at the root, somehow. Is that what is it -- what Gabe sees in this kid? An old vision, half-remembered: with brown hair, over blonde but the same cigarettes and guarded optimism and refusal to lie down and die.

But the kid before him doesn’t know the half of it when his smile hangs, fading and suspended, before he drops his voice and murmurs, “But you’re a good man.” It sounds childish and simplistic: as if there are good men. As if the world can be divided neatly into those who are, and those who aren’t. “I seen you on magazines and posters an’ all sorts. They say you’re a war he--”

Jack has a least favourite word. He doesn’t let himself bear it, and instead cuts the kid off quickly. “You’d be surprised how little that means.”

Maybe it did, once. It’s like arguing with himself in the mirror, fifteen years ago to hear the kid protest. “Means somethin’, doesn’t it?” But the question leaves room for dissent, and argument, so he waves a hand to dismiss the invitation. “Look, what I’m tryna say is I’d be happy goin’ forward if we could--” His frown fades, and he looks resolute once more. “--when I know i can trust you.”

Going forward means --God, it means getting a glimpse of some of those Quiet Houses, through a gap in the scenery of the mountains around here. It isn’t all lost.

But even he knows it isn’t as simple as just trust. Or as quick.

He frowns. “That takes time.”

The kid turns on him like sudden thunder. “You got somewhere else t’be?” He asks, angrily. “I was lead t’believe you wanted this.”

Jack bristles. “I do--”

“Then would it kill you to act--...” Jesse is fully halfway to his full anger before something gives -- it’s not clear what it is, exactly, but his expression unclouds, and he tapers off with a sigh like suddenly it’s all so futile to him. One of his hands pushes through his too-long hair. The other fiddles at an empty pocket: looking for something that isn’t there.

“Why don’t you jus’ come by, then, on Monday.” He says, tiredly. “See the baby for yourself.” He looks away like he doesn’t want to face his own words. “Maybe y’can use the time b’tween now an’ then to think of somethin’ to say.”

It goes right through Jack: the image of black-on-white. A cold room that keeps the rain out. He can still remember exactly how the screen had looked. How the baby had looked, and god, he wishes he had never ever seen it, because now even the idea is painful to him. Maybe he hates it: but any child of his and Gabriel’s could have handled that.

Should have.

Jack swallows on a pinhole of a throat. “I’ll see if my schedule permits.” He says, stiffly.
Jesse, ignorant once more to the bigger picture, nods. “Do.” He says, moving his hands down to
fiddle together like he’s nervous about something (now). “’Cause I, uh --I like you, Johnny.” He
says, in some terribly awkward way before swallowing, and lifting his chin. His voice migrates to a
softer thing. “I didn’t ever see anybody like me lead any men before. An’ you saved the world, just
about.”

Jack has to wonder what the kid has heard. Because, to himself, he’s remarkably bad at any saving.
And any castles they’ve built for him with their accolades and news stories have been since torn
down fivefold. Nobody is ever grateful for the disasters that are prevented. For the fires that never
make it to being lit before extinguishment.

There’s a chance, though, that even Jesse can appreciate that when he nods to Jack like he sees
something kindred within the two of them. “I heard it said more than once that a good man’s hard to
find.”

For a truism, it hits close enough to home that Jack has to laugh. “Harder to keep.” He says, quietly.

The kid smiles at that with some kind of agreement that is equally bittersweet. His arm moves. He’s
pulling the little blanket a little closer into himself. “Well, stick around.” The kid says, trying to sound
cavalier. “You’ll get t’see what it is on Monday, anyhow.” He says. “Supposed to be quite
somethin’.”

There’s a cold that goes through Jack to hear that. Like somebody walking over his grave. Not his,
though --one he never got to give a headstone to. Cassidy, for a girl. Ezekiel. He never even got to
find out what he would call them.

“I’ve heard that.” He coughs out some agreement for the kid’s sake. To fool himself that this is okay
--that he’s okay with this.

He’s not. Maybe he never will be. But it won’t be forever, and then--...

A stronger man would shake these thoughts off in slight --not give them any longer than a frowning
hour. He should be long enough in the tooth, by now, to do that.

Jack orients himself to face between Jesse, and the elevator. “I can’t make any commitments to
Monday.” He says, as easily as he can. “But I --that doesn’t speak for my intentions.”

The kid blinks slowly in understanding. “Still game, then?”

Like this is all a game. Like there can be any winners or prizes or frivolity to be had, there. Jack has
to admit he likes the idea of that and Jesse’s version of events much more than his own. It’s easier to
stomach, certainly.

So he nods. “Still game.”

Easy, then, as if relieved, Jesse leans back into an old sort of lean and cants his head towards the
elevator. “I’ll let y’get, then.” He says. “I know y’got people to see that’re much more important than
me.”

Jack thinks this has been the most important conversation he’s had in years. Thinks that the fate of
his universe pivots on the axis that is Jesse McCree. And this time only a few months ago, he didn’t
even know the kid’s name. Or existence. Or ties to Gabe.

What a mystery this world is, he thinks, as he takes a few steps in the direction of the elevator and looks back again at Jesse. “We’ll speak again soon.” He says, with some sense of certainty. “Until then, Jesse.”

The kid, still holding that crooked little lean, salutes with two fingers like a cub scout. “‘Til then, Johnny.” He says.

(And Jack doesn’t realise it, then, but that’s the image that will come to eclipse his memory of Jesse McCree. For all the ravages of age and parts that end up missing, he’ll think of Jesse like that even in twenty years, holding that lean, hatted and careless in his spirit. A wild thing. A contradiction of elements.

A good man, somehow --if he knows it or not.

And a good man is hard to find.)
Chapter Notes

getting back into stuff is Hard.

It's been a long time. I moved country, and then back again. I finished my postgrad.
There are...reasons for my laziness

**im tryna get back on this regular-like. please somebody still be reading this.

Jesse comes down from what feels like the top of the mountain as if he spoke to god. His hair no whiter, his form no older.

Just the same as he was; and entirely different.

He feels sort of like he’s floating in the elevator: no longer nailed to the floor with the burden of uncertainty, but light in knowing he’s got a way out. Maybe there’s all this mess he’s gotten himself into --but he’s gotten himself out of it, too. And it’s a way out --a peace of mind he hasn’t had in so long that he feels practically dizzy as he descends, in silence.

Angie had helped him find the floor. Said she’d meet him for lunch, too. Trivialities feel realer to him, now. His mind isn’t occupied with the vast, voidlike black of some unknown future. It has a face, and a name --and he’s hungry, anyway.

Jesse likes Angela, too. Funny little bird, as she is, rail-thin and fragile in a way he’s never seen an alpha be. Delicate and strong, all at once. She’s not his type, he knows: too good for him. Jesse thinks his hat is still in the ring of Gabriel for the same reason he always liked cigarettes, and moonshine and playing with fire.

It’s a nice thought, though: halfway to a crush, or something. A way to settle his own nesting anxiety, whether she knows she’s helping or not. He likes to think he helps, too, in the way thrilling movies settle those idle in their lives. He gives Angela a glimpse into terror, and violence and horror, all from the comfort of her own seat.

He’s thinking about it with no real contempt when he makes it back down to one of the mezzanine floors, with the cafeteria she said she’d be on. He wonders if, in another life, he’s have made a good doctor.

Then, maybe not --Jesse’s never liked blood all that much. He wouldn’t even shoot heroin, back in the day.

(More than twice, anyway. )

She’s there when he arrives: already sat with a few similarly-dressed people sitting around her. He doesn’t’ expect her friends will make much of him. But he’s not there for them, and his initial hesitancy dissolvers. He joins the back of the line. He accepts whatever it is the main meal of the day is. He walks over by them.

Angela, when she sees him, has an expression halfway between concern and hope. A mixture.
Always a mixture, in Jesse’s case, when she looks to him apologetically. “Jesse,” She says, mildly, gesturing at the seat in front of her. “How, um --how did your meeting go?”

He doesn’t know if inertia is around him or around the Commander he’d met with. Maybe she’s afraid of him. Maybe she knows something about him that Jesse ought to know.

He moves one shoulder with ease. “Good.” He says, dragging his fork across the rice in his bowl, before pausing. “Least, I think so.”

She brightens, marginally, at that. “That’s good to hear.” She says, gently. Always so delicate. God, it’s still novel enough to him that Jesse thinks he’s in love with the idea of it. “And you seem well.”

For once, that sounds about right. He does feel better; thinks yesterday with Gabriel cooled him off, anyway, but he has a bit more direction now, and he hasn’t felt sickly or anything of the sort (though, what he’s been reading tells him that much is to do with weeks, and not his immediate circumstance).

“Better, a’ least.” He tells her. Drops his gaze to coney his earnestness when he goes on. “An’, uh -- I hope you know I didn’t mean anythin’ when I gave y’ the cold shoulder, the other night.” He does feel bad about it: mostly because he really does like Angela, and it’s not in his nature to be so fickle with moods. He’d have never survived if he was.

For her part, she does seem to take him at his word. “It’s quite alright.” She says, softly. “I really didn’t mean to pry--

Jesse waves a hand. “You wasn’t.” He says. Knows that by now, with the way his scent is, and the way he’s started to arch his back to support the extra weight in his stomach, questions like the one Angela had asked are starting to invite themselves. It’s not like he hasn’t noticed some of the looks of he colleagues --but he’s not about to fight it. Here, he’s bonafide.

There’s some measure of silence when he takes a few bites of his rice. The food here is always good: enough so that he’s a bit baffled by the choice. Left to his own devices, he’d have nothing all day but barbecue jerk and tinned peaches. He thinks he’s made the right call, today, given that Angela’s eating the same thing.

As he swallows, he gestures to it. “What’s this called?”

She takes her time in finishing what’s in her mouth. Even covers it with her hand when she speaks. Her fingers are long and slim. Her nails are neat: painted a faint cream. “Mushroom risotto.” She says, moving her hand away after a few seconds. “Are you enjoying it?”

He nods easily enough. “Sure.” he says, mildly. “All the food here’s nice an’ all.” He looks over his shoulder, to see where the line has thinned out, and where the section of fresh fruit has actually diminished. He looks back to Angela. “Y’know, back home, there was a diner a few miles outta where I stayed.” He laughs a little. “An’ I know it weren’t good food, but I’ve really been missin’ it.”

She considers it for a second. For once, asks no questions. It’s perhaps the only piece of trivia he’s been able to impart about his ‘before’ that doesn’t have some darkness of illicitness creeping into frame. “I think we might have something similar.” She says, “In Bern, I mean. I’ve not been inside, but I know it’s got a old jukebox, and it’s sort of like fast food.”

Jesse can see the bakelite forks and neon already. “An’ you never been inside?”

Angela shakes her head, with a small smile. “I mean, not --not yet.” She says, meanderingly. “I’m not sure it’s the sort of place you go alone to.” Then there’s this moment of clear hesitation, before she looks back up at him, sort of slyly. “Well, I suppose I could always take you.”
He doesn’t follow. The grain of enthusiasm, he can sense, but he doesn’t follow enough to display his own intrigue. “I don’t know if I’m allowed to just up and leave.” He says, slowly. It forces him to recall his first night here, standing out in the cold, ready to try to escape. Having Miss Amari pull him back from the edge. “I thought there’d be, like — protocol.”

It takes a moment to find the word. Maybe because he dislikes it so deeply.

Angela nods. “There is.” She takes a small sip of water between her words. “But I have unspent vacation time, so I can register a day off.” She takes a moment to arrange her words. “And you shouldn’t have much difficulty. They’re likely to be very generous with furlough, given that you’re not on active, and you’re—” There’s still some clear sensitivity from the other night. Jesse finds his own quiet and endless amusement in watching her, as a doctor, try to find another way to say ‘pregnant’. “—and you have medical leave.”

He follows it further, this time, but only so far. “An’ furlough’s the same as vacation time, right?”

Angela nods. “Similar enough.” She explains. “Vacation time is given to everyone. You have a set amount of days and hours you can request to take off.” She takes another small, delicate little sip of water. “But furlough doesn’t affect your vacation time. It’s for — exceptional circumstances.”

Jesse nods, in understanding. For some reason, it makes him think about prison. About how he slipped through the bars, there, due to exceptional circumstances. If nothing, in all his luck and misfortune: he owes a lot to his state. The word moves around in his head.

Seems like all of his exceptional circumstances have come down to the same thing. Something he finally has a name for; Furlough.

“I’ll make a request about it tonight.” he says, with a nod, daring to smile at the prospect of seeing some of the wider world. Angela smiles right back.

“I look forward to it.” She says.

It’s — nice. Not at all what Jesse has come to expect from his life here. It doesn’t sop part of him from wondering if her kindness is genuine interest, or pity. Maybe that doesn’t matter. He likes her enough that he can kid himself for a few moments at a time. He looks at her sort of sideways when he thinks it. Angela is sensitive to the gaze.

She finishes what’s in her mouth before covering it with a hand. “What?” She asks him, playfully.

Jesse drops his head with some small smile. “Oh, nothin’.” he says, easily. “Jus’ hope y’know that everybody’s gonna think we’re a pair.” He feels embarrassed to say it, but it is the truth. Maybe a nicer truth, too: wandering around with Angela makes his story seem like something about young love, instead of an unscrupulous whore. He’s heard some whispers around here.

Angela, of course, merely tilts her head like it doesn’t phase her. “Yesterday morning I was assisting with a laminectomy.” She says, bright with confidence. “I think I can handle being mistaken for your alpha.”

It’s uncharacteristically cool for her. Jesse has to bite back a larger laugh. “Hey, now.” He says, as he scrapes another forkful of risotto up onto his fork. “Y’should be so lucky.”

She laughs, then. It’s nice to hear. Jesse wonders if this is merely par for the course. It feels like the easy sort of talk he could have with Johnny, if only less vulgar. He hasn’t had so many friends. It’s difficult to tell the lines apart that trace the borders of platonic and romantic.
Of course, lightheartedness is only ever ephemeral for him. He can tell the subject’s about to change in the way Angela sort of turns her head to the side and twists a near-white strand of her. Her scent is airy and light, with no hint of violence or oppression.

“I think our lack of marks give us away.” She says, with an ease that migrate to some initial hesitation. She looks up at him for a second. “I would’ve thought, give the instinct, that your clients would have all tried to mark you.”

It’s an intriguing line: one that betrays the fact that Angela clearly hasn’t had a lot of impersonal sex. Maybe any, which to Jesse is sort of unthinkable. The whole ‘instinct to mark’ is often exaggerated, anyway. He’s only had to wriggle away from a set of jaws once or twice.

“Only when they’re out of it.” He shrugs. “When it comes down to it sober, there ain’t many wanna be tied to a whore.” It’s not said with any self-deprecation. He’s grateful or the fact --has told himself so many times how he doesn’t buy the myth of it all even though he often thinks of Gabriel’s neck in the dark. Of his teeth, and what it might be like. It’s dumb; he doesn’t know.

Angela is looking at him as he wonders. He slouches to seem more comfortable.

“Y’know,” He says, “When I was a kid, I got told y’couldn’t knock up anybody y’wasn’t mated to.”

Angela nods, with a distant smile. “I heard that, too.” Her head shakes. “I suppose it’s sweet, for an old wives’ tale.”

Jesse shakes his head to himself, lightheartedly. “Woulda saved me a lotta money on preventatives f’it were true.”

It catches Angela by surprises enough that she laughs, suddenly, and has to cover her mouth again.

(For the first time maybe in his life, then: Jesse feels exactly his age. No older, or wider, or more guarded. Not at some loss of knowledge of skill.

Nineteen, and nothing more.)

-  

Gabe is out of the loop for all of a few hours.

He and Blackwatch have always been well-suited in that way. Both like black holes that drag everything towards them to swallow them whole. Even if he’s been out of it, he gets wrenched right back into the eye of the storm the moment he’s down with his company men.

Word has been passed along from Japan. One of their insiders who’s got close eyes on the Shimadagumi, and who’s happy to report that the robust walls of their fortress appear to be crumbling.

There’s an heir apparent: young, and wet behind the ears at any best guess from the way Gabe hears of his arm being twisted.

The rogue element to it all, and the weak spot, is the kid brother. There’s only so many ways confrontations play out. Gabe thinks in theory there must be fifty: but there’s only ever really one. He knows it as well as he’s ever know any one of thing, and somebody is going to bleed.

It’s a short transmission they all receive. Characteristically brief, as all the company men are. ‘It’s going to be soon’ it says, at the end, which is the clearest sort of warning.
Gabe shuffles schedules to free up his two best pilots and a relief team. They’ll stay grounded, ready to depart at the blow of a whistle (or the drawing of a sword).

It feels good to be back at it. To be surrounded by agents who are utterly competent. Cool in the face of it all. None have questions or concerns to vocalise, or twinges and hesitations. Even the others: sent out to scope out what’s south of the border and what remains of Los Muertos and even the scraps of traffickers down in New Mexico --they say nothing. They are merely ready.

More than once, Gabe has thought that his companies have been engineered to bring him the same confidence he’d has during the war. That knowing no matter what he’d go up against, the person at his back (be it Ana, Jack, or Liao or any of the others) would be as salient and solid as Everest.

It makes him wonder about the kid. Jesse’s no fool. Whatever he does, he will master it --and thus Gabe is aware of the immense influence he holds by what he charges him with.

Smart kid. Too smart. Even if things hadn’t gone down the way they did, he likes to think he’s have picked the kid up anyway. Not out of obligations or anything messy like feelings, but out of seeing the kid work. It’s more than his aim: it was how he talked Gabe out of his gun. How he as the only one of those teamsters to make it out of the motel and a good 500 metres before getting clipped.

His leg has healed up. As for the rest --well, Gabe finds things heal better when he leaves well enough alone.

There’s not much else to say. Their charges have been long-standing since the order to do something about underground weapon proliferation. They have the information about Belarus, and until the remote agents stop producing reliable intel, they’ll hold off on another sting.

Maybe he’s just distracted --the whole meeting long, he keeps having these old visions of Jack. He keeps hallucinating Jesse in them. He’s not sure sure their images sit well besides eachother in his mind.

But this was never really about him.

Afterwards, he retires back to his room for a break, finding the sheets made (Jack was always a conscientious guest, even in heat) and the place dark. The ‘ludes aren’t where he left them, but he finds them all the same, so what does it matter?

Two will settle him for the evening. Moves his mind off of Japan, and off of Jack and all of that. He fights the first 15 minutes of drowsiness, with a practised ease, before getting up in the dark. They don’t do that much to him, anymore.

He goes down the half-known section of hall, and down towards the cafeteria in search of a meal.

-  

It’s late for him to find Fareeha alone.

With no backyard lot to wander out into, she’s left to a sterile room, doing some soccer drills. Gabe only comes past the room on the way to somewhere else --to wandering. He isn’t at first able to tell if Ana is with her. It doesn’t seem like it.

Just the girl, and the holograms she’s aiming for when she kicks, and wanders after the ball. He forgets that children aren’t merely conceptual, sometimes. That it’s lonely, to be a kid --and no place
lonelier than here, where the people closest in age to Fareeha have the most adult problems of all.

Gabe thinks about leaving her be. He isn’t as close to her as Jack: wasn’t permitted the same leisure to hold her when she was hour old, or put her to bed or be alone with her. They only have moments, and while it used to hurt him, he supposes it’s easier.

She was only a year old or so, anyway, when Jack got a title and he got rehabilitation, and even at the time he was glad for the distance, because then at least he hadn’t disappointed her.

Still, though, he has a sense of duty to her. It’s not like Ana to leave her unsupervised or unstimulated. It’s the least he can do as he moves to the doorframe, and leans against it soundlessly. The girl doesn’t notice. She continues to kick with that measured and powerful form that he can recall, frame for frame, in her mother’s gait.

“Not a very fair game.” He says --and feels immediately ashamed in the steadiness of his system. Should be he here, like this? Can Fareeha tell the signs of his inhibition, even at this age? “Wall doesn’t stand a chance.”

She turns around, the ball steady under her left foot, looking faintly pleased --but conflicted, too. Something in her eyes suggests a deeper conflict. God, Gabe can barely communicate with Jesse in all the kid’s wisdom and maturity: how is he supposed to help Fareeha?

Of course, she brightens for his sake pretty quickly, as is her nature. She looks up at him. “Did you want to play?”

It’s not really a fair question. It wouldn’t be right just to leave her in here alone. He knows that Fareeha is safe here, and she can look after herself: but he knows the bitter sting of loneliness. He thinks, here, all of them do in some way. That’s the thing about the summit of a great mountain such as this one: not many people can make the climb to join you.

He steps inside, trying to seem more solid and secure on his feet than he really is. Ironic that here he feels ready to sleep, but he knows if he were to crawl into his bed, he’d be wide awake.

“Sure,” He says, trying to sound playful. “If you think you’re ready, kid.”

Fareeha huffs out a polite little laugh, but it goes no deeper than generosity. She eliminates the remaining holograms and gives him a careful look before passing to him. Her movements indicate no desire to compete or to win anything. Something is in the kid’s head. She needs to figure it out, whatever it is.

Ad Gabe never minds the quiet of it.

He kicks back to her, only functionally. “What are you doing alone down here, anyway?” Watches her face if only to monitor how thick the ice he’s about to tread on is. “No Reinhardt to bother?”

Fareeha switches her feet. She’s quick. “He’s not back until next week.”

“No Angela?” Gabe asks. He’s pulling at straws, really. Doesn’t know what the girl does outside of Ana’s structured time for her.

The girl shakes her head. “Jesse said he’d watch a film with me.” She says, receiving the ball again almost thoughtlessly. “But I think he fell asleep.”

That would explain why he’s been silent on Gabe’s end. He’d been faintly worried that the kid’s introduction to Jack had gone badly, or something, and he was trying to recover or form some kind
of game plan without having to show his face. To know he’s just sleeping is a comfort to Gabe. At least somebody around here is getting some meaningful rest.

He practically forgets about the soccer until it reaches his foot with muted noise. He passes back, now a little more cognizant. “Well,” He says, awkwardly. “Don’t hold it against him.”

The girl shakes her head again. “I won’t.” She looks up at Gabe again, with a perfect balance of innocence and suspicion. He feels he is watching her lose some sweet and childish part of herself in an instance before it. “How did you find him?”

The question is such a strange one. What does he say? That a part of himself, nostalgic and weak, went looking for Jack in the desert; or that he asked at a bar for where to get dopey stuff for cheap? He didn’t find Jesse --not really. Thinks, maybe, they were both looking for something; just, in strange places.

Gabe’s jaw works with uncertainty. “We picked him up in that big sting.” That’s what he settles on. It’s not necessarily a lie. An omission, certainly: but he’s still trying to avoid the burn of her disappointment. Thinks, she’s only of the only ones left who doesn’t revile him in some way.

“How did you find him?” Fareeha echoes. She knows it: has the nature of a child who likes of know everything about everything. Of course she recalls. It seems to give her pause, though. “Was he the one who killed the operative?”

How she knows that is a mystery, but he doesn’t ask. Freezes, instead, unsure of what to say. He doesn’t want Jesse to fall from grace in her eyes, either. He could use every friend here he has. But it’s the truth, isn’t it? Not even the darkest part of his truth. He keeps his mouth shut.

“You know I can’t tell you that.” He says. It’s a weak parry. She can gleam the truth of an answer in a heartbeat. He feels he has to say more. “Agent McCree will be a suitable addition to Compan--”

She hears enough of that kind of talk to recognise mendacity when she see it. “Lots of the men in the gang would have been.” She says, sort of hotly.

Gabe swallows. “They aren’t like him.” He says, weakly. It’s true: the fact that Jesse is young, and impressionable, and Gabe can take him and hammer him into any shape for the future is just as seductive as the kid’s sure skill, and his lack of fear. “He’s a good kid.”

Her eyes narrow. She looks confused into irritation. “I know he’s the one that --that got Mercer.” She says, with some finality. “I saw the infrared.”

There goes Gabe’s only defense. And Jesse’s not a shy kid. By now, she probably knows all about his pills, and his daywork. Even those who haven’t said a word to him can infer as much, from the brand, and his age, and the way he’s already carrying low and obvious.

Fareeha looks up at him, lost. “How did you know?” She swallows. “If he --if he did all that, how did you know he wasn’t like the others?”

Philosophy appears to him in this strange way. He doesn’t know if he is qualified to speak of the kid’s good heart, and his best intentions. Is it worth mentioning how he lingered over Johnny Ringo’s body, moments after the man tried to execute him? How he offered Gabe his cigarettes when he barely had a room under his name?

He thinks the answer lies in all of Jesse’s dreams.

Gabe looks at the girl’s feet. He thinks on his own sins. “I think--” He hesitates. “Sometimes good
people do bad things.” He looks up at her. “And, those times, it matters more why somebody did what they did, than what they did.”

In his own words, it means ‘I never meant to cause any of them pain’.

(Because, to his most childish core, Gabe still likes to believe he is good. Even with the blood on his hands, and the fingerprints on his heart.)

She looks even angrier, for a second, before it melts away into the quiet war of tragedy and her head sort of drops. Her breathing falters.

Gabe has no idea what to do. Thinks, briefly, about leaving. Never thought he’d have this confrontation with the girl. He doesn’t think there’s language to explain what has happened these past months. Nor words for what happened to he and Jack. Some come closer: rust, dissolve, rot; drift.

But she doesn’t come out with an accusation. She surprises him with something that he thinks may be initially worse.

“Mum told me something,” She says, very quietly, like she’s trying not to let her emotions get the better of her. “About Uncle Jack.” She still won’t look at him. “About something Uncle Jack did.”

What has Jack done? Gabe thinks about the sound of ribs breaking. He thinks about wintergreen.

The girl is swallowing, now, with great difficulty. “I --I didn’t know if you knew about it. About what --about what they did.” It’s getting to her now, though, and Gabe isn’t so sure until he sees her shoulders tremble and thinks she might well be about to cry. If she’s anything like her mother (and she is the spit of Ana), then it won’t do to put an arm around her. She’ll want to overcome it herself.

What has him fall prey to inertia, though, is the pieces coming together. That Ana, the girl’s protector, and keeper of her innocence, has confessed so readily. Has defamed Fareeha’s hero so readily: told her just what kind of a man Jack is, and the colour he bleeds. Has given herself up, in the case of honesty.

Gabe doesn’t know what to say.

She does: getting her words out through painful little tears. “I don’t --don’t understand why he did it.” Her whole form is shaking, now, and he realises that she really has lost something. Her memory of the salient is all confused, and she’s lost in some kind of world without heroes. “I thought he was - -I t-thought--”

He still doesn’t know what to say. So he doesn’t say anything.

He drops onto his knees and brings her into his body, and for once, Fareeha doesn’t have that hot streak of pride within her, and he goes willingly, gripping onto him with a childishness he hasn’t seen in years. His shirt is warm, and muffles her noises enough to provide some little dignity.

Whatever he feels or thinks of Jack, in all his revenge and all his grief: it isn’t resentment. No, it’s wonder; that the white-hot flash of nuclear passion can have fallout so deadly that it seeks out and irradiates even the blameless among them.

It touches him, too, that she thinks he didn’t know. That she wanted to be the one to tell him, and with such delicacy. If he were to have a daughter, he thinks --if Jesse’s baby is a girl (or if Jack’s was), he hopes she would have Fareeha’s mercy and grace.
They stay like that for a while. This girl has clearly been in pain for some time. There’s no telling how long she’s known, or what else she knows, but she does start to settle. To take these childish and long breaths in that will help her calm down.

He doesn’t know how long they stay there. He isn’t counting. What would it matter?

The world passes them by outside the room. He hears distant footsteps and doors and elevators that melt away into the silence of quiet houses he can recall. Is he of any comfort to Fareeha? Would he have been to his own child, even like this: shameful in his haze, aching for something deeper than the ludes faint in his system, but doing his best?

The question is only half worth asking, anyway. He never did give Jack a child. And worse, through his actions, the closest thing that Jack has ever had to a daughter has had her love made afraid.

He holds her like he’s trying to tell her he’s sorry.

She’s not the only one he’s sorry to.

Eventually, he feels the presence of eyes at his back, and turns to see a shadow dropping in the door. Fareeha looks up, too, no more haunted by seeing the form of her mother in door.

There are questions in her wise eyes, but she asks none. Ana has always had a good sense of timing, even if she arrived in Jack’s life altogether too late for both of their own goods.

She doesn’t even have to say anything --and that’s maybe the strangest part. For a girl, Fareeha is so frighteningly grown up. She moves away from Gabe, and then that’s it. As if something has changed suddenly: or there are no more tears or whimpers. She leaves that behind as he swallows, and approaches her mother.

Gabe doesn’t know if he should make up a goodbye. “Get some rest, kid.” He says, weakly.

Fareeha nods.

She turns her head to give Gabe one last look (the type he collects) and then hesitates, looking up at her mother nervously.

They are close enough that neither has to say anything. The girl understands what is intended, even if Gabe doesn’t, and he’s left pondering when Fareeha is the one to leave, and not Ana. No, she stays there, in the door, looking between where here girl has gone and where she was: safe from her own turmoil, in Gabe’s grasp.

He can scent her clearly, even from here. It’s some strange effect of ludes, that they always make him sensitive and aware. Benzos, and most other pain stuff, tends to destroy any drive he has to sense.

It takes him a second to climb up off his knees. He isn’t sure if it’s yet safe to be beneath Ana -- physically, that is. They’ve both probably sunk to the same level by now.

Silence is worse. Ana’s gaze doesn’t cower or migrate elsewhere. He feels the need to say something, but can’t think of a word to produce before she cuts in and says, “Thankyou, Gabriel.”

His mouth closes.

He realises her gaze is not the intensity of accusation he’s used to. Something still intense, but other. “I think --I think that’s what she needed to hear.” Ana says it with the gentle resignation of one who does not believe the sentiment but will humour it all the same. That spirit of parenthood that prizes
safety and security over truth, sometimes.

Gabe doesn’t know what to say at all. Never thought he’d find an ally in Ana. Never thought it would take so much infidelity to achieve. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have questions, though. Won’t take her on face value just yet, and presses to ask, “Why did you tell her?”

They could have all lived in silence. He and Ana were silent to each other for years. He and Jack might go the rest of their lives now. And honesty isn’t the payoff Gabe has ever sought.

The woman before him shrugs like it’s a meaningless thing: like she hasn’t robbed herself and her daughter of their last remaining icon for some sake. Jack is the ghost in the room that underpins all of their worlds, his legacy like some dusty Ozymandias that is visible in both of their peripheries.

“It’s better this way.” She says, eventually. Tiredly. “Better she doesn’t make the mistake of putting him on the pedestal I did.”

It’s only then it really occurs to Gabe that Ana might really have loved him. That she and Jesse might be the only people in this mess who have felt and acted and loved honestly - and still lost. Jack knew what he was doing. Gabe did. They’re seasoned at this game that has no prize or victory; only degrees of losing. He never should have punished Ana for her inexperience with it.

Gabe drops his head a bit, and sniffs. His comfortable numbness is wearing off, but it’s giving him enough haze to manage humility. “I’m sorry.” He says, and means it, too.

Ana puts one hand on her hip. It’s her posture, innately, to look ready for a fight (or maybe Gabe is just used to it), but the asp does not coil and strike this time. Only laughs sort of ruefully, enough to say, “Aren’t we all?”

It’s infectious enough that Gabe has to laugh, just once, too.

But the silence that follows is more tensely felt and honest. More so than any other conversation they’ve ever had. After the sound of laughter is gone, Ana’s face looks as it always has done. The warmth in her eyes is scarce again, but not cold, and she nods with sense of parity between them.

At the door, she says, “Goodnight, Gabriel.” with enough conviction that if he tries hard enough, he can nearly convince himself he’ll sleep.

Nearly.

-  

Jesse goes alone --if anybody is wondering.

He stirs on the monday by automated alarm: noises of far-off life that he’d chosen himself. Murmuring and breeze and cars and chutzpah sound real enough that or a second, as he’s waking, he thinks he is somewhere full of life, and not a small room in a large place or a small fish in an ocean.

The scent of Gabriel’s sweat lingering still on the sheets from their last fuck is his only mercy. It keeps him company as he gets dressed. He’s filled out his requisitions, but they haven’t come yet, so he makes do with the clothes he’d been given by Miss Amari as his first mercy. They’re the only ones that come close to fitting, where at first they’d hung sadly like surrender flags.

A reminder of how far he’s come, at least. With the tightness of them: a reminder of how far he’s got to go, too.
He gets dressed like he’s in a hurry, but there is still so much time before his appointment that he ends up merely pacing the little room. He wets his hair and pushes it out of his face. He smokes a cigarette --only one, because the book says not to, but makes it last as best he can as he plays with his latest little gift.

It’s supposedly a normal thing, the little blanket. He’s been reading that babies can’t see much of anything when they’re first born, but they can recognise voices, and they can recognise scent. Of course, the voice is familiar, but the words are not, and little scraps of scent-bathed fabric transcend every barrier in the way they say ‘I’m here’.

Seems an odd gift, then, doesn’t it? Because Jesse isn’t supposed to be there, in that way. Really, none of them are supposed to be here.

The universe seems to have some funny plans for him. There are, at least, some constants. The shadows of Gabriel lingers over him in the hoodie, even though it’s warm in the room and it’s hardly the season. Jesse longs for winter, for once --to experience the real thing: frost and white-capped mountains.

He keeps thinking about that conversation he’d had the other day. About the man he now calls Johnny (different from the real thing, mind). Miss Marie always had sad eyes, and his are like hers. Not actively expressing remorse, but coloured by it. Thankfully, that’s where the similarity ends. This Johnny doesn’t look like he’s about to grift anybody, and in any case, it wouldn’t be as bad as this universe has grifted him.

He’d not been guaranteed an audience with this Johnny at the appointment since last they spoke. Hell, it’s not like he expects Gabriel to be there, either. It’s probably better that way. To save them both from sentiment. Some awful (and new) part of his brain hopes to see Gabriel there. He shakes it off in flight.

Jesse remembers the room number. He takes himself, this time. He goes alone.

The elevator ride is quit and air-conditioned. He tries not to think too hard, and nearly succeeds. But then the elevator drops and Jesse gets that funny weightless feeling and feels the stirring of some foot or hand and suddenly can’t escape it.

He steps out into a corridor and walks down to the right. For a moment, he stops short, where by the open door is the figure of a woman that he recognises as Miss Amari. There, waiting for him. Jesse has’t been so abandoned as he’d first thought. She’s not the kind of woman that gets snuck up on, and turns with no real surprise in her face, but instead a look of patience.

Jesse feels sort of bashful at it. “Hey there, Miss Amari.” He says, trying to sound playful more than nervous. “I wasn’t expectin’ a chaperone.”

She nods to him in greeting. She makes no move to go inside. “I can wait outside if that would make you more comfortable.” That’s what she says first, as pragmatic as ever. He’s still not used to regarding his own comfort. “I won’t mind.” Her smile is faint, but sincere in the eyes. “But I thought you might need some moral support.”

Jesse recalls the Little Miss, and how Miss Amari has done this all before. She knows about all this stuff much better than he does, and knowing that she’s lived through it, and that her daughter is as sweet and honest as she is does make Jesse feel better. It help him to believe this isn’t anything. That he’s another in a long line of omegas; nothing more, or less.

He finds himself nodding without giving it much thought. “I, uh--” His smile is inadvertent. “I
‘preciate it.” It’s truer than he initially realises, an that hits him as he goes a little more towards the door and then feels the heat of resistance in his belly. He doesn’t want to go in there alone.

When he looks over his shoulder, Miss Amari is behind him. “Right behind you.” She says, gently, and gives him a small nod. It’s something --but in the face of uncertainty, Jesse realises that while he’s grateful, what he really wants is the scent of ash and a tall, comforting presence at his back. Alpha; his. Alpha; absent, and he thinks he’ll have to make do without Gabriel or the man he now calls Johnny.

It must be obvious enough that she can see the trepidation on him. Miss Amari’s hand is comforting on his shoulder, then, suddenly. “Are you okay?”

It’s still not a question Jesse’s had much practise answering. He swallows, but nods. “Yeah.” He says, a little quietly, even if his heart feels a bit like it’s in the back of his mouth and his body is heavy and separate from him.

When he steps inside, he recognise the pale woman with the enormous braid from his first appointment. The familiarity is neither comforting or dispiriting. It merely is: in the same way that when the door closes he realises that it will just be the three of them.

(A footnote:

Jack does not forget. Jack wants to be there.

But then the merest suggestion of the idea: the sound of the equipment and the smell of sterility in the room and the blurring image on the screen --they appear before his helpless sight to torment him. He has the vision of his child lying there on that monitor, nameless and anonymous and dead, and he sees it over and over again.

Jack doesn’t forget. That’s part of the problem.)

On the road they shouldn’t be on, Jesse is in the room instead. He’s the one who looks cautiously to Ana when he has his blood pressure taken, and a blood sample drawn. When they check his hands and feet for signs of swelling, and weight him up, silently, taking the numbers like marvelling over something domesticated. Ana’s gaze on him is steady, and reassuring. This is all part of it. He isn’t alone.

She was --with Fareeha. Alone, that is; and it’s not something she wants for Jesse.

He’s calm enough, if the way to air gives to his dusky scent is any way to go by. He answers the questions with simple, one-word answers that are clear. Ones that make him sound sort of grown up in the same instant that they reveal him to be hopelessly out of his depth.

Things seem initially promising. Normal, she should say. The only thing of note is after the attending obstetrician takes his weight and purses her lips and tells him ‘he’s under the the recommendation, still’.

Jesse’s mouth quirks like he feels oddly proud of it. A selling point for him, no doubt: young, pretty thing that could make any person holding him down feel powerful. He is still small of frame enough that it seems to centralise and exacerbate his little bump all the more. It’s hard to picture him as one of Reyes’ hardy, broad gunmen (but that’s who he’ll be, in a year).

The obstetrician spins in her little chair as she looks from a slide of readings to the examination table to her right, gesturing blandly. “If you would--”
A noise cuts her off, and they all recognise the soft beep of keys, audible from out in the hall. Jesse, especially, who whips around all quick, and is all eyes on the door to hear the soft hiss as it opens.

Ana braces herself for wintergreen and every cold apology she can imagine. Her mind is somewhere else: on sins known, and forgivable.

But she finds instead her strangest ally.

“Don’t mind me.” Gabriel says, trying his best to appear utterly unflapped as he searches for a seat and instead comes to lean against the wall behind Jesse. The obstetrician nods her head in some overly-auspicious way that suggests that if she doesn’t know Reyes, she at least recognises his rank, and isn’t about the raise any qualms about the sudden intrusion.

Hell, neither is Jesse. The kid has gone from hard as metal to soft as nostalgia in the second it has taken Gabriel to cross the room. He doesn’t look emotional, or overcome or fond as Ana had suspected he might. No, Jesse’s not that soft --he never learned to be, and instead he leans back in his chair and plays it cool.

He says, “You’re late.”

Gabriel looks over his shoulder, mock-coldly, and begins to say, “Well, I can always--” before Jesse snatches at his sleeve and pulls him firmly into the room.

And Gabriel, for his part, smiles off to the side in his sly way that matches the kid’s. Made for eachother, she supposes, in their cool detachment and in the way neither of them want to admit to anything. It’s sweet, almost --how much it seems to take them out of the scene, what with the obstetrician waiting there for some explanation or something, while none is given.

Maybe it’s just biology in the way Jesse’s nerves have disappeared: gentled by what would be his alpha. Maybe he’s fool enough to be in love. That’s brutal enough that Ana recognises it.

It doesn’t hold forever. They’re all on a schedule, and the marching tick of the clock doesn’t lose a step, so eventually the obstetrician clears her throat and says, “Where were we?” and stands up in that way that implies they’re all about to move. Jesse regards her coolly from his seat like she’s not his immediate concern. “Let’s move on, then.”

That reminds them all of why they’re there.

Jesse looks initially hesitant to rise, and to disrobe to any measure, or to climb on the examination bed. Maybe that’s because neither Ana or Gabriel can guess at the strange feeling he remembers consuming him the last time he’d done this. Hell, he hadn’t even known if he was going for the fix or not, then --not fully, and as much as he was horrified, a part of him had been hoping the very sight would trigger some change.

But it’s not like Miss Marie said at all. Sure, he’s grown fonder on it --like he grew softer on his designation when he knew he couldn’t change it, and like he’s grown softer on the sharp mountain peaks that keep him here.

See --Jesse’s just expecting a grainy little picture on a screen. Maybe a new head-spin. He doesn’t anticipate the needle.

(Ana doesn’t either --if it’s any consolation. And Gabe has no expectations. He was locked out of this kingdom with Jack. He never got to be in the room when it happened, and he still doesn’t know if he should be thankful or ruined by that.)
Gabriel is here, now, though. He never sidles up to Jesse. Ana is closer to the boy, even as they move in the room, but he’s there. A warm, comforting backdrop, as familiar and pleasant as sultry night air.

He watches Jesse shimmy his shirt halfway up. His stomach is now the only soft part about him, rounding as it fills out with life, and Gabe would be lying only to himself if he didn’t feel some old, primordial instinct flinch when he sees a stranger’s pair of hands on Jesse. A professional, no less, doing an otherwise clinical job --nevertheless, though, he feels it.

He remains, though, watching the kid’s shoes change in shape as he curls and uncurls his toes, fidgeting childishly from the cold. It’s done mostly in lightheartedness, by his face. He looks no more scared by the doppler, when it comes out, and leans back easily, giving these cursory and testing glances to Ana now and again as if to check her response. She’s the best yardstick he’s got for these things.

It’s when the obstetrician comes to rest it low on the curve of Jesse’s belly that Ana leans towards him and murmurs, softly, “Did you ever --with Jack, did you ever see--”

It’s quiet enough that Jesse can’t hear, but still painful enough that gabe interjects, whispering also, to say, “Just the picture.” The first picture. Never was a second.

Ana takes a second for that, and nods solemnly, as if in understanding. She gives him something like a small smile of warmth: trying to say, without saying, that she hopes this fills part of the void cracked into him by the loss. No need to us words: he sees for himself only a few moments later.

Jesse becomes almost the afterthought, when the strange obscuring themes of light come into focus and eventually settle onto the image of the baby.

The black-and-white are sharp colours, and all Gabe can think of is neon. How could such desperation and fever, like that strange night in that strange town, have caused this? The small, risen peak that hints at the shape of a nose. Hands: tiny, and delicate with fingers not distinguishable. The shape of a spine sits at the bottom like fine embroidery in cloth.

He looks away, only for a second, to measure Jesse’s response. The kid has been guarded: careful in what to say and Gabe is scared to admit that he doesn’t know what Jesse feels. It was easier, before, to read him, and map him out. Out here, Gabe can’t chart a thing, and he can only look for clues in the way the kid’s fingers play absently with the soft fabric of his pulled-up shirt.

And in the way he looks off, to the side, like it’s some sporting event that’s only mildly interesting, and not the gift of quiet houses that Gabe spent chasing for too long.

Once or twice, his eyes drift up to the form of the child, but Jesse’s face is turned away enough that his expression can’t be read further. After a few seconds, he looks down at his own soft stomach with a look of mild concern. It’s cause to consider if the the kid really cares at all, but the consideration is unfair.

What’s Gabe’s comparison? Jack? Jesse is a victim of circumstance: not a villain of it. Better that he looks away now, so he has learned to by the time he has to see the child in the arms of somebody else.

He only realises he’s misjudged the kid when he notices the movement of the needle too late.

Jesse curls his toes again; tenses most of his little form like he’s trying to get away from the point of contact. There’s something barbaric about it --something savage and wrong. Maybe it’s the way the
iodine swirls look like coppery blood in the wrong light, or the way Jesse’s jaw is all tight like he’s fighting a whimper. Ana, too, is surprised into silence by it.

Gabriel gravitates to his boy without any thought.

It’s over in a few moments. After the collection of some strange and yellowish fluid, the needle is extracted carefully. The site is wiped down. Jesse doesn’t open his eyes until the obstetrician steps away, and she begins to speak.

“That’s the worst of it over.” She says, over her shoulder. “We’ll have the results back in three days.” Gabe isn’t looking at her: but at Jesse and how his fingers hesitate around the site of the little puncture like he wants to touch it, but can’t bear to.

It’s Ana who’s the sharp one: concerned enough to ask, “Isn’t he a little young for a--”

The obstetrician finishes with what she’s holding, and turns back to Ana with a chilly sort of calm. “It’s standard protocol when medical history isn’t available for either parent.” It’s said without insinuation, and yet, Ana still feels her eyes trailing to Gabriel, who is fixated himself on a freckle near the bottom of Jesse’s nose. He’s still gripped by the wondering: is that his child at all?

He got a good look at the Ringo fella only once, and that was when he put a bullet into him. Maybe Johnny did get the last laugh after all.

It seems the grim business is concluded then, with the way the obstetrician resumes her station by the kid’s side and resumes the scan. For his part, Jesse is used to being treated a little like a doll. He’s got no objections to being moved and touched like this. The only thing he sort of objects to is Gabriel: and he’s not sure why.

It should make him happy, to have the alpha here: but there’s a distinct gap between sex and this sterility and clinicity around the baby. At least in the past, when he’s been looked down on or had his knees wrenched apart --at least then he never wondered what alphas thought about him.

It’s an ugly thought to dwell upon. He tries to think of something else: even tries looking up and seeing the baby and thinks about living in this moment. But even as the image stays on the screen, of that tiny being floating, oblivious and sweet --hell, even as it’s still inside of him with all it’s errant kicks and flutters, it’s not really his.

The feeling of lightness in the pit of his stomach, and the warm, hazy feeling that overtakes him is only going to hurt him later.

So if he knows it, God, why can’t he fight it?

It’s no use but to trace the lines he can see with his mind. Trying to figure out which parts of him are in there: his looks, or his thoughts, or the colour of his eyes. The angle changes as the doppler moves. Nobody really says anything --Jesse’s glad for that. He feels stupid for even looking. He can’t do a thing for this kid but carry it.

So he doesn’t say anything: just listens, and watches as best he can without it getting to him. The obstetrician counts the fingers and toes for him: ten of each, formed perfectly: clenched into these little fists. No signs of anything unusual in the curve of the spine or the shape of the face. Jesse hates that he feels proud to hear it: that the blurry and indistinct image is his greatest achievement. That those ten fingers and ten toes are the best things he’s ever contributed to.

His own joy at it catches him off-guard, and stupidly, he asks, “Can y’tell if it’s a boy or girl?” He says, feeling the eyes of the room on him. Feeling Gabriel’s, especially. He shrugs it off as best he
can. “Figure Morr’son might want to know, an’ all.”

The obstetrician makes a noise like she’s pleased, and she moves her hand a few inches down. “We can certainly try.” She says, gently. “It depends if the little one wants to co-operate.” There’s a joy to her voice that gives Jesse some strange optimism as the picture on screen becomes less and less easy to identify.

He thinks she’s found what it is they’re looking for: some patch of lightness that should indicate something, when her hand stills, and the obstetrician squints. “Those lungs look very developed.” She says.

Of all the stupid things to feel on hearing that --Jesse feels relief. Pride, even, that for all of his misadventures, the baby has ten fingers and ten toes and lungs that are--

“That’s not--” But her hand moves again, as if seeking a new angle, and then her expression says it all before any words can. “Something’s not right.” She says.

(At least she doesn’t say that she’s sorry.)
Three days, she gives Jesse. Three days before any conclusive news.

It’s a more creative method of torture than blackwatch has ever employed.

She tells him three days and the kid’s jaw clamps shut and doesn’t open for a good long while. Not for the rest of that time in that terrible room: with the image of the baby haunting them, making these little, sleepy movements and clutching at nothing, as oblivious as it has ever been to Jesse’s turmoil.

She even gives him a printout, as if it helps.

‘Three days’, so Jesse nods, and is granted leave to wipe himself down and redress and gaze into the midspace for one agonising second. It’s all he seems to allow himself. One little moment where he gets to look as young and small and vulnerable as he is, realising the trap he’s snared for himself, and how it’s rendered him completely lost in time and space.

It’s not like him to go so cold, all of a sudden, but he does. The kid doesn’t even say some thanks or goodbye to Ana, or the obstetrician, and least of all to Gabriel. He has to follow the kid out, of all things. Has to play the part of the one wanting.

Ana doesn’t follow. She gives Gabe a look that signifies her understanding. She has stood between them at many other moments, but this won’t be one of them.

But then Gabe is out in the hall, following suit behind the boy, and realising he knows nothing of how Jesse must be feeling. Does he despise this? Does he care? The kid has been so careful until now, not to feel too deeply, not to think of it as ‘his’, but he’s all tight in his posture and Gabe has to wonder if it’s only now he sees what he’s surrendering.

It’s a mess: and for once, Gabe feels dense in his simplicity.

He catches up to Jesse without anything to say, but says something anyway. “Jesse,”

And Jesse does what’s kept him alive. Walk on, Boy.

Gabe tries again, reaching out with a hand, as gentle as he can be in this time of fragility. “Kid --kid, stop.” There is very little resistance, for once. Jesse doesn’t turn to face him right away, but seem to take a deep, gulping breath before he turns his head slightly, like he’s preparing to dive and never come up again. Still, though: indecipherable silence that has Gabe panicking. “You --you know that whatever --whatever happens--”

The kid lets out a sigh: and surfaces quicker than either of them were expecting. “Y’mind if we don’t do this right now?” He asks, tiredly, in this way that ages the boy somehow --makes Gabe realise
there’s not all that much difference between their heights. Only, Jesse’s limbs are as thick as flowerstems, and his posture is bowed to accommodate his bump.

The sight of him is enough to blunt the steel of Gabe’s will. He would be harder on anyone else, and characteristically so: but the combination of the kid’s expression (lost, and not even attempting to fight it) and his dusky scent of creosote have the alpha softening. Turning him back to the pet he’d once been years ago, under different circumstances.

He nods, eventually. “Okay.” He says, woodenly, a little hollow on realizing that he’s the one who needs to make sense of this, actually, now Jesse had made his intention of silence clear. Gabe squeezes the shoulder still in his other hand with equal measures warning and affection. “That’s not gonna make this go away—”

The kid burns cold again. He puts space between them with clear intention. “Nothin’ does.” There’s a moment of pause like he wants to say something else. His mouth makes the letters without sound before something in him changes. “Forgive me if I don’t wanna talk circles in the dark, but whatever’s happenin’ is clearly outta my damn hands.” He drags a heel, childishly. “I’ll burn that bridge when I get to It.”

“Cross.” Gabe says.

Jesse looks up at him, sulkily. “What?”

“It’s ‘cross that bridge.’” His reply is quieter this time, trying to appease the kid. He’s learned how to do that well enough after the years he’s had. No fury on all of the earth compares to that of an omega wounded, and Gabe’s bones are mostly healed now.

The kid makes a face that doesn’t seem exactly reactionary: something of discomfort as he turns his face away and rubs a hand on the underside of his stomach. “I said what I said.” He mutters, letting out a shallow and lightly disturbed breath.

Gabe’s instincts tug at him. Jack had him largely locked him out of this kingdom in the brief and hazy weeks they were expecting, and here and now it would be so easy to reach over and to feel whatever it is Jesse is feeling. But Jesse is ignorant to that feeling, and so much the better. He couldn’t play house with the kid to steal his best years.

And he couldn’t rob Jack of his last chance.

He asks, though: makes himself known in his own way. “You okay?”

The kid nods, ever stalwart, even as he lets out a little grunt. “Y’think it’s boys that kick more?” He sounds breathless --and the suggestion in his words leaves Gabe a little breathless, too.

He smiles. “I don’t know about that.” He says. He wonders if the kid is disappointed by still not knowing, even if it was a characteristic move for the baby to have its legs tightly and firmly crossed just to be difficult. Maybe it’s for the better: as it keeps them both from thinking of names and colouring otherwise blank concepts.

That’s years too late. Gabe has always wanted a little girl. He doesn’t expect Jesse to much care either way.

But on this count, he doesn’t mind being wrong.
That revelation comes much later, anyway.

When Gabe isn’t bold enough to beg this kid to stay, so he offers a haircut in exchange for the company. The kid could use a neatening up, anyway, and it appeals to whatever is left of Jesse’s vanity enough that he comes by, into Gabe’s own room, where the scent of wintergreen has wound down to near nothing.

They do it in the en-suite. Jesse sits on the edge of the bath and doesn’t look much in the mirror. He’s been quiet all day: unsociable and pensive. Gabe orders food to his room before he starts so that Jesse doesn’t have to face anybody else he knows, and all the questions they’ll have.

Fareeha wouldn’t be able to help her curiosity. Ziegler is a funny bird: mortified but hungry for details. All the worse should Jack run into him.

Jesse is safe here. His breathing is even under the rhythmic and essential snip of the scissors. Gabe stands behind his left shoulder to cut, but is distracted more than once by the view of them both in the mirror. The light is harsh and fluorescent and it ages him. It makes him wonder where they’ll be in ten years’ time.

Jesse is a being of the present. Parentless: pastless. It’s hard to picture him any older than he is --or any different at all. Hell, maybe in some timeline or some universe Jesse will be pregnant then, too, and want to be: but Gabe can’t kid himself about a hallmark scene.

The best he can do is try to picture some abstract child: ten, and theirs. Wide mouth, big smile, straight teeth, with wild hair just like Jesse’s the same dangerous spirit. Androgynous like all small children. Tall, and skinny and free.

Maybe Jesse is thinking about it, too. His introspection is difficult to read. It always appears as melancholia, and today of all days, he’s got enough to be melancholic about. The OB hadn’t said all the much: she didn’t want to without more data, but Gabe got the gist. Fluid in the lungs. If there’s pressure on the heart, they’ll have to operate in utero.

That’s the only part that had made Jesse flinch.

They heard that before the alternative: no pressure on the heart, which would only require a complicated type of c-section. Gabe wishes any of them were optimists, but they aren’t. Even Ana is probably preparing for the worst, somewhere.

There will be no easy way to tell Jack. It shouldn’t fall to Jesse.

But it will.

There in the bathroom, there silence is only magnified by the way the tile amplifies each snip of the blades. He cuts around Jesse’s ears carefully: but the kid tenses a little anyway.

His voice is quiet in the room. “Not too short.”

Gabe steadies his hand for a second. “It’ll look good.” He says. The kid rolls one shoulder like he’s warming up for a fight.
“I know how it’ll look.” Jesse mumbles. “Jus’ --not too short, awright?” He looks up, then, seeing the inches of hair already gathering on his left shoulder and down this shirt, collecting on one half of the top of his bump. He brushes them off. He looks briefly at Gabe. Lord, the kid has no rights to look the way he does, even now.

He gathers another section of hair in the comb but keeps his eyes on the mirror, wanting another glance to happen between them. “It’ll just grow back in a week.” He says, staidly, as Jesse rolls his eyes.

“I don’t want it like yours.” He says, petulantly. That reads deeper, but Gabe lacks the heart to look. “I like it long.”

Gabe lowers the comb. “You like it scruffy.”

The kid sneers. “Cuttin’ it off ain’t gonna make me look no sharper.” He shakes his head. “I can’t even fit this damn shirt.” It’s a moment of bare vulnerability: Jesse’s only defence or advantage in this world has been his looks, and it clearly hurts him to feel that he’s lost them. Of course, he’s wise enough never to leave a weak spot open for very long. “B’sides,” He sniffs, “You ain’t exactly in white tie yerself.”

Gabe feels himself smile, faintly. “Not when I can help it.” He murmurs. He considers the back of Jesse’s hair, which has already been trimmed down: the kid will have to compromise on this one. “I’ll leave the front long.” He says, to appease the boy, before collecting another section of hair.

The kid nods in a small gesture like he’s grateful. He looks down again as Gabe continues, and as more hair scatters down onto the kid’s body, he comes to appreciate how poorly the shirt does fit. It’s loose all over his arms and chest and tight across his stomach. It’s cotton, too, with no real give in the fabric. One of Gabe’s wouldn’t look any better. He doesn’t know how to fix it.

He tidies up another few strands. Jesse stays quiet.

“How requisitions come in yet?” He asks, to try to lighten the mood.

The kid shrugs. “I ain’t checked.” He says it with disinterest. Gabe has to wonder what the kid has ordered. He only ever recalls seeing Jesse in his own clothes once or twice. There’d been a plaid shirt the first time, but he can’t recall anything else, and for all he knows the shirt might’ve been a gift from Johnny Ringo.

He doesn’t think of Ringo much, besides a bit of blood spatter. Thinks he could go crazy thinking about every man that had their dirty hands all over Jesse before him.

He tries to distract himself from --well, everything. He tries not to think of the baby, or of Jesse’s past, or of Jack. He focuses on cutting evenly and the steady rhythm of the kid’s breathing until he’s nearly done: standing in front of Jesse rather than behind him to trim the fringe. He has to lean down to get a good angle: and from there he can see the faintness of faded freckles on the kid’s nose and scent him good and deep.

Vitality amidst dry, cracked earth. Like a cactus-flower.
The kid doesn’t flinch, or swallow, or even move until the blades are clear of his face. Even then, all he does is brush the cut hairs from his nose and look up. He meets Gabriel’s eye, and tilts his head.

“Maybe you oughta grow your hair out.” He says, with this little lilt like he’s joking. He’s doing a very convincing job of looking as if he isn’t thinking about it, but Gabe knows him well enough to see it: the darkness in the corner of his form that hangs like a veil of shadow on the dark side of the moon.

Gabe doesn’t mention that Jack used to say the same thing. It seems long enough ago that it doesn’t hurt as it should. “Maybe not, cowboy.” He says, gently, finished in his part, and leaning back to admire his work.

The kid has been such a source of conflict that he must have forgotten about the Jesse he’d first met. For some reason, seeing his face clearer, unobscured by split and tangled ends helps to remind him. It’s stupid to think, but the kid has nice ears, of all things. He’s beautiful and Gabe is standing there looking a thousand years older.

He steps to the side so the kid can get a better look in the mirror. “What do you think?” He asks, retiring the scissors.

Jesse hums. “It’s short.” He says, hesitatingly, playing with the back of his hair, probably missing the mess of before.

“It’ll grow out.” Gabe assures him. “You look good.”

Jesse’s mouth quirks at one corner before he can master himself. He does, though: and it’s almost sweet that it should surprise him now, when he used to strut about naked in that little motel room of his.

“Sure.” He shrugs, coming to stand with one hand on the small of his back. The kid has wider shoulders than his build has filled out, and the added weight is sure adding its strain. Once he’s up, though, he doesn’t play characteristically coy, and instead goes straight for winding his arms around Gabe like they’ve not seen together for a few hours, now.

He’s stunned, briefly, as he feels the kid tighten and nose at his collar, over his old mark (which is now more a hairshirt than anything else), taking in the scent there. Warm ash: a sweet decay that reminds the kid of easier times.

“Thanks,” He murmurs, “For --for comin’ today.” He sounds almost bashful. Had he expected absence? That wouldn’t be cruel of him: Gabe has left the kid to do so much of this alone. Blackwatch purloins him. Jack pulls him to attention with every manipulation of the strings connecting them.

Yet, on emptier days such as this, it’s the least he can do. He promised the kid Mexico and he has yet to even see the border. He promised Jack quiet houses that are silent in their non-existence now. One of these days, he’ll get it right.

For now, he can only reply with the easy squeeze he gives Jesse. “Thanks for letting me.” That much is honest --he was half-expecting the kid to kick him out. Ana is miraculously, somehow more involved in this than he. Maybe he should be envious; though, mostly, he is relieved that it means the kid isn’t alone.
Omegas protect each other. Lion’s walk with lions, and all that.

Gabe isn’t one of them, but he tries to be of comfort as best he can. “Whatever happens,” He murmurs, this time allowed to continue. “You’ll be fine.” His heart aches, and he can’t stop himself from saying, “Both of you.”

The kid seems to still. Maybe he sees Gabe for what he is, in that moment. Sees his heart, and how much love it holds for one unknown. He would have played house in a different world: and yearns to, in this one, despite it all.

But then, maybe not, too.

-

Requisitions are there in the morning. It’s a bit of good news to break the tension of the next two days.

Jesse receives all of the things he’d ordered: no substitutions or missing items, and it’s a hell of a thing, because he’s never owned so many new things so suddenly. There had been no regulations to his order, besides how much he could spend, and he hadn’t come close to that bracket. He doesn’t even know how he’d begin.

The order is delivered to his room sometime when he’s not there, so he returns to the box. Inside are mostly clothes: polyester and cotton-blend button ups, in square plaid and in a variety of colours, tailored for pregnancy. Jeans, too, blessedly --three pairs.

One pair of boots, half a size up. He never saw Johnny Ringo’s boots new: they were always worn and scuffed, and dusty. So these look almost bare, somehow, with the well-made leather clean and unmarred. They’re also without spurs: not that he’s seen a single horse in this country, but he’d liked the idea.

There are other things, too --little things he thought would be sweet, like books, and a carefully packaged little cactus. But there’s one thing in particular, hidden between two shirts, that he finds and is instantly delighted by: a little ten-note harmonica in C.

Childish in his excitement, he gives it a test blow and grins at the sudden and loud note it makes. It causes some flutter in his stomach, like stirring, and he stills, wondering if it’s coincidence, or a reaction to the noise. Whichever, it is a reminder of the news to come, has him sitting down on the bed, suddenly grounded.

He rests a hand on the top of his stomach and thinks about everything he’d been told. The idea of surgery isn’t a certainty, but it still makes him feel weak, and queasy. There’s a wrongness to it --to disturb the baby so early; but what then, if it’s the better option? Either way he gets cut open.

At least if it’s sooner, he’ll know, one way or the other, if the baby makes it. Rather than to carry for all that time and have nothing to show for it. That would destroy anyone.

He looks down at the boots. Clutches the harmonica and thinks, he had been able to order anything from anywhere. Overwatch has all kinds of branches: ecopoints, research centers, colonies, and all kinds of allies, too. Jesse doesn’t doubt that here, he has access to some of the most sophisticated medical care in the world, and the thought eases him. It’s survivable. He’ll survive.
That doesn’t make the concept of the first incision any friendlier; he’s lived through worse, though.

He thinks to take a shower before looking for trouble. He can smell Gabriel on him, and it’s comforting, but sort of distracting. It makes him want to clean and tidy and prepare for something. Nesting --like Miss Amari had said. Knowing what it is doesn’t seem to nullify the effect.

He’s more than happy to rid himself of the uniform hand-me-downs, leaving them in the corner as he steps to the bathroom. It’s not like Gabriel’s an inch: a small, triangular room with the corner tiled. A curtain draws across it to separate it from the sink and toilet. The mirror above his sink is small, with rounded corners. It catches him as he passes through and he almost doesn’t recognise himself.

The cut does suit him, he thinks but only as an afterthought. He’s mostly looking at his body --not reviled, like he thought he would be, but sort of...fond. Maybe it’s that he knows what to expect, with all the reading, and feels less unnatural. Time has worn him down, too. He’s now so used to the presence of his growing stomach that he thinks he’d probably feel off-kilter without it.

He only stays under the jet for ten minutes or so, anyway, tiring of standing up and instead taking the towel to the room to dry off. It’s a novel pleasure to dress in clothes that are new, and his, and fitting.

When he’s dressed, he feels much more ready to face the world. Ready enough that he finds the fixed holopoint by his bed and accesses it, watching the blue blink to life. He clears his throat awkwardly --still unused to talking to what is essentially a wall.

“What would I find the Strike C’mander?” He drums against one of his knees softly. There is a careful second of silence.

“Strike Commander Morrison is currently at e/040/001.”

Jesse doesn’t recognise the room number immediately. He can’t say if it’s an office or a cafeteria, and he doesn’t like to interrupt. “What’s that room used for?”

“It is a training room.”

He closes the holopoint and gets to his feet and walks to the door, before turning on his heel and going to the corner he’d left his clothes in. Still in the left pocket of the sweatpants is the printout he’d been given. The newest one, that is. The other is his bookmark.

He pretends it’s practical. To himself, though, he can recognise this dangerous but indestructible feeling he has when he sees it, and he knows, already, that the very same feeling will undo him entirely when he has to say goodbye.

But it’s not the time for goodbyes, yet.

Jack is somewhere across base and Jesse doesn’t want to keep this from him any longer. It’s another two days agony, but to say it out loud would be two days of agony not spent alone. It doesn’t take very long to cross to the east wing and catch an elevator. From there, he finds the room pretty easily on his own.

The door is closed and he hesitates before it --but only for three or so minutes. Then he knocks.

There’s a moment of silence that’s to be expected. Jesse tries not to crowd the door. A part of him is
scared in a deep way that if too many things go wrong, Jack will pull out of this tenuous agreement. It would satisfy that feeling Jesse gets on seeing his printout, but nothing else in him. He doesn’t know what he wants: his pendulum swings suddenly and often and he both wants and fears the blessing and burden of it.

Jack doesn’t know any of that. Maybe that’s why when the door does open, he looks leisurely as a person can with his chest heaving lightly and his body all glistening and his cheeks pink with a little exertion. His eyes brighten considerably to regard Jesse, and it makes Jesse feel all the guiltier for not having better news.

“Jesse,” He says, warmly, stepping aside and gesturing into the room. “You look well.” He seems to mean it, to, as he sees the door being shut. Jesse, meanwhile, takes in the sight of a basic weights room bathed in the scent of pine and sharp frost. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t come along yesterday.”

Jesse looks over his shoulder, and in the better light of the room, becomes aware of how large Jack’s form is. He must rival Gabriel in size, and in the vest, Jesse can see the sheer density of muscle on him. Were it not the what he knows, and the wintergreen in the air, he’d assume Jack to be a beta, at least.

“That’s awright.” He says, gently, looking around for a place to sit. For his part, Jack crosses the room to find a towel that he presses to his neck. “I’m sure you been more than busy.”

The remark seems to catch Jack: and he looks up. Guilt fleets across his features for only a second. His head moves in a very slight nod. “Something like that.” He says, regarding the boy coolly, and then smiling slightly. “The haircut suits you.”

Jesse brightens to hear it. He straightens, perched as he is. “You think so?”

Jack meets his optimism dead on with a quirk of his mouth. “You look less like a vagrant.” He says - and it’s so light of character that Jesse can’t help the laugh of surprise that gets out of him. He adjusts where he’s sat to retort.

“Well, look who found a sense of humour.” He shakes his head. It’s a pleasant thing, to see the blonde in this way. Even now, there’s this quiet and voidlike sadness to him, like he’s being consumed from the inside out. The joke at least tempers that.

Jack looks at him with this focused and profound gaze. Jesse can’t read all of its intent. “Maybe you have enough for the both of us.”

The boy lifts his head and considers it. “Ha, well--” He says, guilelessly. “That’s as maybe.” He has been called a ‘funny kid’ on many, many occasions, but even he can tell that those instances refer less to humour and more to the strange circumstances of fate he often finds himself in. It has never bothered Jesse. To live is absurd. There aren’t any real alternatives.

He looks around the room, at the matted floor, and the scattering of equipment that Jesse recognises from other rooms he’s been in, but hasn’t fully used. Light duty; what a thing it is. He still feels pretty left in the dark.

Jack looks far less exerted now. Recovered, in an instant. Jesse wants to ask. “Workin’ off some steam?”

Jack nods his head gently. “Just while the western front is still quiet.” He says, in that way he has,
where it’s like two voices with completely different intents speak at once. A more defeated afterthought: “It beats waiting around for a disaster.”

Jesse isn’t sure what he means by that. If Jack already knows what bad news is on his doorstep --but he’s not even looking at Jesse when he says it. The kid swallows. “Y’do that often?”

It’s an old laugh Jack gives him, then. It reminds him of Gabriel. “Disaster has a tendency to come if I’m waiting or not.” He turns away from the kid to stretch out an arm: long and impressive as it is, and just about misses the kid’s lips making the phrase ‘me, too’.

He has to remind himself that he’s here for a reason. It would have been easier to hide in the new sleeves of his shirt, but it’s not his style. He swallows again, and adjusts his posture where he’s sat. He never notices how drawn up his shoulders get. His posture has always been lousy. Miss Marie used to chide him for it, and he thinks he ought to have listened, because the weight of his stomach is doing him no favours.

He fumbles in his pocket for the piece of filmpaper. It hides from him, initially, but he finds it, and brings it out while Jack has his head bowed to stretch out his neck. Why is it easier like this, with him looking away? Should Jesse ask him to keep his eyes closed the whole time?

“I thought you might wanna see what y’missed.” He says, instead. It’s a prompt to offer Jack the picture, but he has to fight this moment of inertia. The picture --and all it represents, is his, and even that is hard enough to give up that he feels lost and teary in less than a second. The pendulum once again swings.

Jack does turn. He regards Jesse so fondly once he realises: doesn’t even take the damn filmpaper at first, but just makes this line with his mouth like he’s got too much emotion to contain, but does, anyway. Despite the size of him, and all of the pain he weathers and every scar Jesse can easily see, he’s gentle as anything to take the picture into the palm of his hands.

“Little bastard had their legs crossed good an’ proper.” Jesse squeaks, trying desperately to make a joke of it all but finding himself stuck. He was already anticipating the sting of the bullet: does that make it worse? “I, uh --didn’t get to find out about the sex, but, uh--…”

Jack give not a word of guidance either way --not maliciously, but completely absorbed in the world on the edges of the paper. He’s been dreaming for a long time.

God, he has to tell him. Has to relive the fear of the first incision by making the words come out of his mouth.

Of course, before he gets the chance, it is stolen from him.

“I like the surprise.” Jack says, then, absenty, like he’s talking to somebody else. It throws Jesse squarely off-balance --which he guesses isn’t that difficult, these days. It’s the devotion, he supposes, that’s what really gets him. This unconditional, irrefutable and unstoppable adoration for something so unknown.

Did Jesse’s mother love him like that? His father?

It aches him so. For all that he doesn’t know. For all that he knows Gabriel’s love is ashamed. And now the pendulum is stick on the far end of melancholy and Jesse sort of wishes he hadn’t come, or had come with better news, or that he wasn’t so alone here. He tries to swallow it all --or carry it all,
somehow.

Maybe it’s cruel to ask, but it comes out of his mouth suddenly, “Y’ever find out, before --about--”

He shuts up good and proper when he sees the other man’s jaw tense. It’ll take years for that wound to close, and even then, it’ll still be tender. Maybe it’s just easier for him right now, to see other pain, to distract from his own.

Jack surprises him when he shakes his head. “It wasn’t--” He sighs. “Too early.” His arms are all tense at his sides despite his level tone. “Probably for the best, anyway.”

Jesse must be a thousand years old when he nods his head just a little. “It is.” He hates that he can feel Jack looking at him suddenly. He hates that he recognises realisation, because he’s seen it so often. “I didn’t know if it was late enough, or --or anythin’, really.” He tries a short laugh. “I don’t even remember askin’; the lady if what she scooped outta me was a boy or a girl --but I asked, apparently.”

He only realises, once he’s said it, that between Johnny’s decomposing body and himself, he’s never told anybody else that before. Not even Gabriel, and he had asked. Not even Gabriel; because how would he say it? How could he put it in a way that the Alpha would understand?

He doesn’t know what it is to hold life like that. He doesn’t know what it is to lose it. One look at Jack alone, and he knows: Jack understands him. More than pity could, or horror. For however different their lives are, they at least meet at the broken places like two halves of a map.

Jack hesitates on his words. He looks at the ground. “How old?” It’s almost terse, like he’s angry about it. Jesse isn’t. He knows that all the fury in the world has never been able to reach into the past.

“Jus’ turned sixteen, then.” He says, passive as a finger on the trigger, even as Jack exhales suddenly like the words have struck him hard to wind him.

“Christ--” He cries out, but Jesse doesn’t want to hear him. This can all come later, he’s sure.

So he stands up and shakes his head, solemn as a preacher. “Don’t.” He says, tiredly. “I read your personnel file. You was in war at a similar age.” Jack’s mouth opens, then, but the words stop themselves --sensing where the boy’s heart is at. “It’s rough all over. I ain’t special for it.”

Jack never quarrels, or disagrees, even if it’s clear he aches to do something, and has to merely settle by grasping Jesse’s shoulder gently and rubbing with his thumb, as if trying to settle the wild animal in him. As if trying to tell him that everything is okay, now.

That’s now what he says, of course. Shakes his head all low and looks real tired, for a second, of fate bringing him somebody else’s order. “What was it you said?” He murmurs, “About how somebody can be lucky and so unlucky?”

That makes Jesse smile. Maybe all this year really has given him some wisdom. It’ll be the only thing he’s asked for. He leans back against the bench behind him and looks at Jack for a second, before looking away, too wiped about by direct contact to hold it. “Maybe we’re jus’ making the best of eachother’s misfortunes.” He says, softly.

He breathes in pine and thinks about how evergreens withstand even the coldest and harshest of the snow. “Anyway,” But he still needs to say it and fulfil the reason he came here. “If you don’t wanna
find out about the baby’s sex, I --I won’t tell ya, but I’m gonna ask.”

Jack withdraws, then, and that seems to signal to the both of them that they should maintain some distance about all this. If nothing but to spare both of them at the end. So he withdraws and nods, coolly. “It’s your prerogative.” He says, before his eyes travel down to Jesse’s stomach and he smiles, fondly. “I’ve heard that carrying low means it’s a boy.”

Self-conscious, then, or maybe just a little excited, Jesse presses his palm low against his bump. “Really?”

Jack laughs, then, for once with a lightness. It’s disarming as a ceasefire. “It’s just a wives’ tale.” He says, softly.

Never too far from a witticism, Jesse cants his head and laments with some fondness, “Well, I don’t know if it’s high or low. I jus’ feel big all over.” The kid has broad enough shoulders, but such a slight frame that it looks like he could be knocked down with a feather. There’s softness there, though, burgeoning fat that’s much more typical of their kind than Jack’s hardness.

He moves his hand out to the space between them before he thinks to actually ask. “D’you mind if I-”

Jesse shakes his head pleasantly, and places his hands on either side of his stomach to accommodate. “Not at all.” He’s so easy about it because part of him has sort of been waiting on this. Gabriel has never really asked. It’s difficult to tell if he’s faking disinterest or interest --but either way, Jesse knows he’s faking it.

But this moment isn’t about Gabriel at all. It’s about how Jack bends his knees and comes lower and how his touch is so reverent and gentle like Jesse is something beautiful to behold (even if it’s not anything to do with him in the first place) and he can already tell that there spring of love that Jack has runs deep into the marrow of his bones. He really wants this.

He continues to feel there, warm hands, minimal pressure, before he looks up at Jesse. “How far along are you, now?”

Jesse feels struck by a little shyness, but fights it. “Halfway, she said. Twenty weeks.” He explains. “Little one’s supposed to come end of January.”

January is still miles away, of course, but it feels closer than the early springtime. It feels like years since prison. Even Jesse’s memory of his room is fading. He doesn’t remember the cracks of the ceiling tile like he used to, or the staleness of the air. In a way, it’s comforting.

But that doesn’t mean the fall isn’t coming. That doesn’t mean he isn’t already bracing himself.

Jack isn’t thinking about all that. January is the God of his house right now. “Have you been feeling any movements?”

Jesse tries to hold his smile. “Yeah.” He nods. “Little flutters. Not very strong yet, but I’m sure they’ll get there.”

They’re not yet strong enough for Jack to feel. Not even Gabriel, and Jesse at least has that as a comfort for now. But as ever when celebrating a win, the universe will be quick on his heels to get even, and every time he feels himself grow, his enemies seem to get closer, and see to be stronger.
Jack straightens, then, with his eyes all bright. What does he do to get his eyes so shiny? Or to get his
grunn voice as soft as nostalgia when he asks, “And you’re still --you’re still sure this is what you
want?” His eyes are cast away, but his heart is in it.

Lord, his heart. Jesse can’t fault that part of these things.

“But more I talk to you,” He says, with the calm of inevitability. “Or hear about you, the more sure I
feel.” To hear it, Jack brightens and smiles like a small child, wide and unlike any other picture Jesse
has seen with all the self-awareness of a child.

And as much as Jesse wants to hold onto that expression and walk it up the door and carry it with
him --he can’t. He’s never been a good liar, and he came here for a reason. To say it out seems to
make it worse by making it tangible, but Jesse is trying to learn to trust himself. He remembers
thinking he was dead when he heard a snap of a rifle and the heat of a bullet, or the cold of Johnny’s
pistol under his chin.

He survived all of that. He’ll survive what’s coming. They both will.

So he swallows, and bites the inside of his lip and waits for Jack to turn away before he musters it.

“Johnny, there’s --there’ something else to tell you.” At that, Jack turns again. Jesse wishes he didn’t
have to look at him. Jesse wishes he didn’t have to do this at all. “The doc said there was a build-up
or a blockage or somethin’ in the airway.” His own throat feels tight when he thinks about it. His
hand has drifted back to his stomach without his own conscious realisation.

Jack’s expression is between horror and optimism. The suspense must be terrible, and Jesse is trying
to spare him.

“She took some samples and said she’d get back to me the day after tomorrow, but that I might--” He
swallows again, but it does him no good. “--they’ll either have to cut me open now or later to fix it,
and it --it carries a risk.”

Jack continues to look at him. The cold and heavy penny seems to drop. “You mean surgery?”

The word is as much of a cut as a scalpel. Jesse nods, miserably. “I can send you the --the report.”
He whimpers. “An’ I understand if this changes how you--”

Like sudden thunder in a summer’s sky, Jack moves, and Jesse’s whole body tenses before he
realises that Jack is embracing him. That it’s no movement of impulse or violence, but of tenderness.
His voice is even gentler this close, and this quiet, when he murmurs, “It doesn’t change anything. I
wouldn’t--”

The sudden abounds here. Jesse is comforted for a second until he sees light appear over Jack’s
shoulder, and from the holopoint on the wall a screen extends. He squints at the words on the screen:
‘Director J K Fallowfield’.

More hesitant, Jack turns, then, and lets go of him. He looks at the screen mournfully, and then to the
boy. “I’m sorry, Jesse, i have to take this.”
The moment has abducted all of Jesse’s strength to speak. His voice is miniscule when he whispers, “I was gettin’ anyway.”

True to his word, he stands up from against the bench and takes a few steps towards the door. The scent of pine and sharp, sweet frost surround him. His heart is returned to Sister Winter a season early.

As he comes upon the door, though, he hears Jack’s voice ask after him again. “Is there anything else you need?”

Jesse stares at the door woodenly. “Oh, uh --naw, I’m grand.”

Without looking, he feels like Jack nods. “We’ll speak again soon.” He says.

Jesse isn’t capable of saying anything much else. He feels overwhelmed by lots of things. He wants his mother. He wishes everything was different.

But what he echoes is a weak, “Yeah,”; and then he’s gone.

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